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OR,

The Railroad Pard's Rough Run in Satan's Camp.

BY COL. A. F. HOLT,
AUTHOR OF "HEADLIGHT HARRY" NOVELS,
"BLACK BUCKSKIN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING ADVENT.

"G'LANG, thar, ye durn lazy brutes! W'ot the blazes hez got inter ye, this trip? Reckon this is no time to fall asleep 'longside the road. We're half an hour late a'ready, 'count o' yer blasted laziness, so ye'll hev ter hump yerselves the rest o' the way. Git up, thar—git up, git up, I tell ye!"

High above the clatter of hoofs and rumble of heavy wheels arose the stentorian voice of

EVEN AS THE ASTONISHED CAPTIVE RAILROAD PARDS GAZED, THE HUGE MASS, POISED FOR AN INSTANT ON THE VERY VERGE OF THE CLIFF, SUDDENLY PITCHED FORWARD.

Jockey Joe, the mountain Jehu; and, as if to give emphasis to his remarks, he swung his long whip through the air with a crack like a pistol-shot, causing the lagging nags to start forward with a sudden jerk that threatened for a moment to upset the rickety stage-coach, and produced a promiscuous shaking-up among the inside passengers.

It was a wild, romantic scene in the very heart of the mountains. Here penetrated a narrow, tortuous defile, flanked on either side by precipitous walls of rock that rose straight up to a tremendous height, while, in the dismal depths of the pass, dark, creeping shadows even now began to wreath fantastic shapes.

A rugged, rock-strewn trail followed this tortuous way, along which the cumbersome stage-coach toiled laboriously, creaking and groaning with every revolution of its wheels; while Jockey Joe, anxious for his reputation for being "always on time," continued to vent his displeasure by simultaneously lashing and cursing his jaded horses with liberal hand and tongue.

In marked contrast to the grizzled, rough-and-ready driver was the solitary outside passenger perched upon the seat by his side—an individual of rather marked personality. He was but a mere youth, apparently under twenty, slightly above medium height, and with a slender, supple figure. His features, too, were handsome, being as clear-cut and regular as any woman's. His beardless face glowed with the fire of youth and health. Dark, glossy ringlets clustered about his neck, while from beneath the sombrero's brim, eyes black as jet shone with wondrous brilliancy.

The garments of this youthful traveler, coarse and ill-fitting as they were, could not conceal the graceful contour of his form; nor did the brace of six-shooters, hung one on either hip, seem quite in keeping with the fragile form and effeminate countenance of their owner.

Not strange, therefore, when this handsome youth, with the face and figure of a school-boy and the garb and accouterments of a typical mountaineer, nimbly mounted the driver's box just as the stage departed from Fortune City, that he was closely scrutinized by Jockey Joe, who lost no time in cultivating the "tenderfoot's" acquaintance, but with poor success, for the stranger was so uncommunicative that the driver soon abandoned the attempt in disgust, consoling himself by abusing his patiently plodding horses in the most approved fashion.

Of this boy's fellow-travelers, four in number, who sat within the narrow, box-like vehicle, we may say that two were typical mountaineers, brawny, red-shirted and well-heeled fellows. Two others who occupied the opposite seat, and were conversing quietly between themselves, were tall, athletic men of middle age, with long hair and luxuriant beards. Their garments were those of the miner and prospector: flannel shirt, jacket, and trousers tucked into heavy boots, and the usual belt from which the necessary six-shooter was suspended.

Nothing in their appearance would awaken the suspicion that they were not typical Westerners. Yet they were not typical miners or Westerners but were, in reality, none other than the Railroad Pards, with whom the readers of this series are well acquainted.*

Headlight Harry, the young engineer, had saved from death the old miner, Gideon Goff, and was rewarded with a cipher locating a treasure cached in the Colorado Mountains. This cipher, by a mischance, fell into the hands of an unprincipled scoundrel, named King Kirby, who had dogged the miner East for the purpose of securing Goff's precious secret. Headlight Harry, accompanied by his devoted friend, Rufe Ruffle, had started West to secure his legacy,

but encountered a series of rather startling adventures at Fortune City, which threatened to bring their eventful career to an untimely end; but, with their usual good luck having escaped this unlooked-for peril, the two Railroad Pards decided to continue their treasure-hunt, and thus it is we now find them nearing Satan's Camp—the Mecca of their hopes.

From Fortune City to Satan's Camp was a wearisome journey over thirty-five miles of the roughest of mountain roads, but the pards were content with the knowledge that another hour, at most, would find them at their journey's end, when, suddenly, a long-drawn whistle, loud and shrill, startled the driver and passengers alike. At the signal a dozen figures sprung suddenly into view, a few yards ahead, and then came the command:

"Halt, Jockey! Hold yer hosses! Here's the toll-gate."

Joe evidently had "been there" before, for he evinced not the slightest trepidation but obeyed orders promptly.

"Them's road-agents, my lad," he muttered, grimly. "If ye've got any vallybles better prepare to shell 'em out."

The youth at his side evidently was prepared for another course of action, for, with startling quickness, the deadly muzzle of his revolver pressed the cheek of Jockey Joe, while he cried with fierce emphasis:

"Drive on! Drive on, or you're a dead man!"

Then with his disengaged hand, the youth seized the whip, and brought its long lash down upon the leaders with wicked force, causing them to bound impetuously forward.

The now enraged road-agents rushed toward the coach, yelling furiously, at the same time discharging a volley at the two on the box. Jockey Joe pitched headlong from his seat, shot through the brain; but, even as he fell, the dauntless youth caught the lines, and, standing erect urged the animals with quick whip-strokes into the very midst of the outlaw band!

So furious was the rush that the road raiders were compelled to leap aside to escape being run over; but this brought them on either side of the coach, where, yelling like fiends, they opened fire again.

At this critical moment the four inside passengers took a hand in the "fun," a literal stream of bullets poured, and the outlaws went down like nine-pins on either side, while their unwounded comrades fell back in confusion before that unexpected fusillade.

In another moment the coach was fairly clear of the gang, who, now fierce for vengeance, came on in hot pursuit.

Once clear of the outlaws, the inside passengers no longer returned their fire, but, crouching low to avoid the bullets, awaited the result of the driver's remarkably daring attempt to carry them out of danger.

On flew the rickety vehicle, rocking and swaying at a fearful rate, rapidly drawing away from the discomfited road raiders, who, soon realizing that the game was lost, abandoned the chase and reluctantly withdrew to their mountain fastness.

A sharp turn in the road now revealed the lights of Satan's Camp twinkling like fireflies in the distance, and then it was that the dauntless driver for the first time exhibited signs of uneasiness. Slackening speed considerably, as he reached the outskirts of the settlement, he hastily secured the reins to the break bar. This done he sprung from the box and quickly vanished in the darkness! This act was entirely unobserved by the four passengers within; and, left to their own guidance, the horses trotted leisurely into the camp, and came to a halt at the customary stopping-place in front of the so-called "hotel," where the usual motley crowd had assembled, to greet the arrival of the stage from Fortune City.

On this occasion, however, more than ordinary interest was evinced, for the rapid and prolonged firing had attracted general attention, down in the valley and everybody was anxious to learn the result of the scrimmage. Judge of their surprise, therefore, when, instead of beholding the well-known figure of Jockey Joe perched on the driver's box, they saw but an empty seat and reins lashed to the break bar!

Cries of astonishment went up from the crowd; and when, a moment later, the inside passengers had sprung out and discovered that their late traveling companion, the hero of the outlaw fight, had mysteriously disappeared, their astonishment only added to the now intense excitement.

CHAPTER II.

LIFE IN SATAN'S CAMP.

SATAN'S CAMP!

Never was a place more aptly named, for this, indeed, seemed Old Nick's favorite stamping ground. Here, apparently, law and order did not exist, and violence held undisputed sway. Nestled high among the mountains, amid surroundings grim and desolate, walled in on every hand by the everlasting hills, this camp so flourished that its reputation in the outside world became a by-word for what was rough and tough and undesirable as an abiding place.

From the nearly three hundred individuals who composed its regular population, it would have been difficult to select two score who did not fraternize with the Prince of Evil.

There was, indeed, an element that ranked above the regular camp denizen in respectability, comprising a number of the hardy miners, who toiled by day in the neighboring gulches, but whose propensity for gambling drew them into camp at nightfall, ready to condone if not to add to the general disorder.

Such was Satan's Camp—into which the two Railroad Pards now ventured, on their quest for the lost Goff treasure. Nor was the venture taken in ignorance of the real character of the place, since Gideon Goff had admonished them on that point; and the Pards were not long in discovering that Gideon's picture of the camp was by no means overdrawn. In fact they had hardly emerged from the "hotel" the next day, after a good night's rest when they were brought face to face with one of the camp's almost daily "visitors."

There was a sudden outburst in the street, of angry cries, followed by several pistol-shots. One man fell, while another stood above him, the smoking revolver in his hand. Then the excitement ceased! Rough hands lifted the lifeless form and dragged it unceremoniously away, while the assassin coolly replaced his weapon and sauntered off without a hand being raised to stay his progress.

"Hang me for a Mormon if this isn't a reg'lar Hades," uttered Rufe Ruffle, in deep disgust, as the two moved away after witnessing the tragic affair. "If it's the fashion here to slaughter men in the street afore breakfast, then I opine the sooner we pull up stakes an' git, the more liable we'll be to get home."

Headlight Harry's face wore a grave expression as he replied:

"Yes, Rufe; the fact is we have struck a pretty tough locality. But, we were forewarned, so here we are, right in the lions' den. It's now too late to back out, even were we so inclined."

"Who is talkin' about backin' out? Don't think I'm a-skeered, pard. I hain't come all these miles to flunk at the last minnit. No sir-ee! I'm a-goin' to see this game through, or bu'st in the attempt."

"Nobly said, Rufe! God grant we shall be successful in our mission, though I'll admit the prospect is not brilliant. We are in such peril here that it behooves us to act

*See Half Dime Library Nos. 759, 727, 691, 673, etc.

with the utmost caution. Especially should we avoid any chance quarrel with these desperadoes which might involve us in additional difficulties."

Thus conversing, the Pards leisurely made their way through the camp, taking in the many scenes that met their view. They looked on all sides for the strange youth who had figured so notably in the events of the preceding night, but if he had indeed entered the settlement at all, he was extremely careful to conceal his presence. That there was a mystery of some kind connected with the case, the Pards were very sure.

As they slowly threaded the one straggling thoroughfare of the camp, one of the gaming saloons in particular attracted their attention, being a large two-storied structure, painted a gaudy yellow, and bearing above its door in flaming letters the sign:

GAMBLERS' GLORY.

KING KIRBY,

Proprietor.

It may be imagined that the Railroad Pards read this suggestive inscription.

"So this is the den of our arch-enemy," remarked Harry. "Well, Rufe, we can't learn the ropes any too soon; so I propose that we pay the boss of the camp a friendly call, just to see what his ranch looks like on the inside."

"Beard the lion in his lair, eh? All right; I'm yer huckleberry! Lead to the slaughter, pard."

Feeling secure in their disguise, the two entered the "Gamblers' Glory," to discover that the gaming "palace" could boast of nothing remarkable in the way of interior decoration. The ground floor comprised one large, commodious room, divided in the center by a heavy curtain, the front portion being utilized as a bar-room, while the space back of the screen was allotted to the gamblers.

Despite the early hour, the saloon was well-filled with loungers, and when the Pards entered, it was to become at once the target for a battery of curious eyes, for strangers were such a rarity in the settlement that their presence always created more or less surprise and conjecture.

The young railroaders sauntered in, apparently oblivious of these inquiring glances, and, leaning against the nearest wall for lack of better accommodations, surveyed the scene with the ease and unconcern of genuine natives.

There was a lack of the usual excitement in the bar-room, since those present seemed content to sip their drinks in comparative quiet. But, this was the calm before the storm! Plenty of excitement was in store for the Pards, as was evidenced ere they had been ten minutes within the "Gamblers' Glory."

There was a sudden commotion outside, and half a dozen ruffians burst into the saloon, led by a red-haired giant six feet high, whose belt fairly bristled with weapons. This giant approached the bar, bringing his huge fist down with a blow that made the structure shake.

"Whoop! Set 'em up, barkeep!—drinks for the crowd! I'm flush to-day, an' I'm settin' 'em up for all creation—I, Tom the Teaser, am doin' the ban'some! Sa-ay, d'ye hyar me twitter? I, the boss bruiser o' Satan's Camp, am posin' as a universal liquidator o' thirst, a benefactor o' the human race! Haw, haw, haw! Ho, ho, ho!"

The bartender hastened to fill the order, while the red-haired bruiser who had styled himself Tom the Teaser leaned against the bar with arms akimbo, and surveyed the throng with a complacent grin overspreading his ugly face.

But, suddenly, an angry gleam shot into his snaky orbs, and with a snarl he bounded forward.

"Ah, ha! I've caught ye at last, ye durned misshapen imp o' darkness!" he bellowed, pouncing like a panther upon the object of his sudden wrath.

The latter was a youth of twenty or thereabouts, who had mingled unobtrusively with the crowd; and certainly a more grotesque specimen of humanity than he it would be difficult to imagine. A dwarf, standing scarcely four feet high, with legs bowed and arms of disproportionate length, bearing upon his broad back an ugly hump, and with a face decidedly repulsive of aspect. The dwarf whose grotesque ugliness had won for him the sobriquet of Spider, now withered in the vise-like grip of the Teaser.

"Ho, ho! I've got ye fast, ye hump-backed imp o' Satan," roared the boss bruiser, as his victim struggled vainly to escape. "D'ye remember, Spider, I swore I'd cut off one o' yer ears next time I laid my paws on yer dirty carcass? Now I'm agoin' to keep my word, hang me for a hoss-thief if I ha'n't!"

And clutching the now writhing dwarf by the collar with one brawny hand, the Teaser swiftly drew a huge bowie-knife from his belt, evidently determined to put his horrible threat into instant execution.

"It'll improve your looks immensely, Spider," he chuckled, giving the murderous blade a preliminary flourish, while his drunken companions looked on approvingly.

"Reckon I'll have to make it two fly-flappers instead o' one. Haw, haw!"

A howl of terror burst from the hunchback, and, slipping out of his jacket with a sudden, eel-like wriggle, he made a wild break for liberty.

It chanced that Headlight Harry stood directly in a line with the door. The hunchback dodged adroitly by him, and sped like a flash into the open air; but Tom the Teaser, rushing madly in pursuit, stumbled over the engineer's outstretched foot and went heavily to the earth, his weapons flying harmlessly from his grasp.

In another moment the big bruiser had regained his feet, and was prancing wildly in front of Harry, brandishing his huge fists.

"Cuss ye for a long-legged, big-footed son of a sea-cook!" he roared. "What d'ye mean by trippin' up the boss bruiser o' Satan's Camp? Can't ye keep yer lubberly carcass out of a gentleman's way?"

Harry calmly faced the irate bully.

"I'm sorry you had such an ugly tumble, my friend," he said, coolly; "but it strikes me that the fault lies wholly with yourself. Had you looked as you ran, you would have escaped the fall, and would have the dwarf's ears dangling from your belt by this time"—a speech that had much the same effect upon the Teaser that a red rag would have upon an angry bull.

"Ho, ho! My fault, is it?" he howled, fairly dancing with rage and excitement. "Add insult to injury, will ye? Great hoppin' horn-toads! I'll teach ye to buck ag'in' the boss bruiser o' Satan's Camp! Hang me for a hoss-thief if I don't chew ye inter more'n a thousand pieces!" and the Teaser peeled off his coat, spat on his hands, and went through a variety of extravagant flourishes by way of preliminaries.

A genuine fight was far more interesting than tantalizing a helpless dwarf, and the throng waited impatiently for the red-haired giant to begin his task of pulverizing the innocent-looking stranger.

As for Harry, he kept his eyes upon the cavorting ruffian, and awaited the expected onslaught with the indifference of one confident of results, while Rufe Ruffle looked on in illy-concealed anxiety, ready to support his friend in case of need.

"Now, stranger," cried the boss bruiser, "make yer will, say yer prayers, an' prepare to quit this earthly sphere, for I kalkerlate ye'll be deader'n a door-nail in less'n three shakes of a lamb's tail. Here I come, young

feller!" and the Teaser bounded suddenly forward, aiming at the engineer's head a blow that would have felled an ox; but the huge fist descended on empty space, while, at the same instant, the giant received a clip under the ear that sent him reeling backward.

A cry went up from the assembled throng, while the Teaser eyed his adversary for a moment in undisguised astonishment. Then, with an angry bellow, he made a rush to crush his victim by sheer brute force.

But, Headlight Harry was adroit enough to avoid this attack, and the red-haired rustler lunged clumsily past, clawing blindly at the air. This proved disastrous to the big tough for, like a flash Harry's iron fist shot out, and Tom the Teaser, turning just in time to receive the terrific blow squarely between the eyes, threw up his arms and went down with a crash that fairly shook the floor, lying there limp and apparently lifeless.

A deep hush fell upon the astonished crowd; then, when they comprehended the truth—realized that the boss bruiser, for the first time in his wild career, had been completely knocked-out, there came a spontaneous burst of applause for the bold stranger who had accomplished this to them remarkable feat.

At this moment Headlight Harry made an unpleasant discovery. During the struggle with the Teaser his long beard and wig had become disarranged and the tell-tale articles now lay upon the floor, together with his hat, while the engineer stood revealed in his true character to the curious gaze of the crowd!

Filled with chagrin and alarm at this unlooked-for catastrophe, Harry hastily replaced his headgear, while Rufe Ruffle looked on in unutterable disgust.

However, this occurrence seemed to have awakened little interest among its observers, disguises being by no means unusual in a place like Satan's Camp; and the Pards breathed more freely when, almost immediately afterward they left the "Gamblers' Glory" and sought a more congenial spot.

There were but two men in camp who would recognize them—King Kirby and his right bower, Black Jerry; but, as neither of these men were apparently on the scene at the time, the Pards were led to believe that no serious results would follow Harry's involuntary unmasking.

But alas! this belief would have been rudely shaken had they realized the truth—could they but have seen the man who, from behind the curtain that divided the two apartments, had remained an eager spectator to the entire scene, and whose evil face, as he watched the departure of the Pards, wore a look of the most malignant hatred.

That man was King Kirby, the boss of Satan's Camp!

CHAPTER III.

THE KING ON THE THRONE.

THE second floor of the "Gamblers' Glory" was divided into several smaller apartments, which the proprietor had reserved for his own private use.

Here, in a plainly-furnished room that overlooked the street, King Kirby, the recognized boss of Satan's Camp, sat at his ease shortly after the events just described. Lazily puffing at a cigar, he watched the curling smoke-wreath float upward with the dreamy gaze of one deep in contemplation of some all-absorbing subject.

"So, then, the young fool has followed me to Satan's Camp, eh? Of course he is after old Goff's treasure—what else, indeed, could bring him here? Ha, ha! The young chap's zeal greatly exceeds his discretion, or he would never have ventured to beard the lion in his lair. Well, since he has taken the trouble to hunt me up, I will see that he meets with a cordial reception."

As the gambler's thoughts thus took form

his lips parted in a tigerish smile, while a devilish light danced in his jetty eyes.

"Confound that scoundrel, Jerry! He's a mighty long time in showing up. Deep into some deviltry on his own account, I suppose. Ah! Here comes the precious rascal, now. Just speak of Old Nick, and he always bobs up at your elbow!"

There was the sound of heavy footsteps on the creaky stairs, and presently the gambler king's right bower and partner in evil appeared to view.

"So you've showed up at last have you, Black Jerry? Seem's to me you're mighty deliberate this morning. It's fully half an hour since I sent for you."

"I know it, pard—I plead guilty to the charge" was Black Jerry's humble admission. "But, ye see, there wuz extenuatin' circumstances—"

"Indeed! How so?"

"Why, ye see, I was deep inter a game o' poker wi' a tenderfoot when yer message arrived, so I jest had to stay an' play it out. Sorry I kep' ye waitin', pard, but the temptation was somethin' irresistible—I had sich a ge-lorious hand."

"Oh, yes; I dare say! You always have a glorious hand—in fact, that is one of your chief characteristics," was Kirby's sarcastic retort. Well, I s'pose I'll have to excuse ye this time, Jerry; but see that it doesn't occur again. And now, having skinned the tenderfoot to your heart's content, it's high time to turn your attention to business o' another sort."

"I'm yer huckleberry, pard! What's on the docket now?" Black Jerry eagerly inquired.

"Oh, I've got a little job for you, Jerry—a job just suited to your liking! But, first, sit down there, wash the dust out of your throat with a little old rye, and then enjoy a choice weed while I explain matters at leisure," which directions the stalwart ruffian was nothing loth to obey.

"Now, Jerry, I've got quite a little surprise in store for you," the King went on, after throwing aside his own half consumed Havana and deliberately lighting another.

"I suppose the circumstances of our recent little Eastern trip are still fresh in your memory, are they not?"

"I reckon so, pard, since it's only three short days ago that I celebrated my safe return to camp by gettin' under a most tremenjous jag. Jumpin' jack-rabbits! I haven't hardly got over it yet!" and Black Jerry grinned broadly at the recollection.

"Such being the case, then, you will readily recall the fresh young fellow who meddled with our little affair at Richville, and who was awarded by the old miner with the secret of his hidden treasure—a gift, by the way, which benefited him but little, since at this minute I have the valuable document safe in my inside pocket. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed the lesser villain. "Ha, ha, ha! We played a winning game that time, an' no mistake. Oh, yes; I remember the fresh young galoot. Headlight Harry was his handle—an engineer by profess. We looked his record up pretty thoroughly, you remember."

"Well, Jerry, I have just had the pleasure of meeting that same young gentleman again," announced Kirby, at which his satellite jumped up in sudden surprise and excitement.

"You don't mean to say that young tenderfoot has ventured into Satan's Camp?" he ejaculated, in blank amazement.

"I saw either Headlight Harry or his double, less than one hour ago."

"Where?"

"Right in the saloon below."

"Pard, ye must be mistaken, sure. Why, the galoot wouldn't dare come hyar!" persisted Black Jerry, still unconvinced.

"He has more sand than you gave him credit for, I reckon," returned the King,

grimly. "There's no mistake about the matter, I assure you, since I saw the fellow with my own two eyes. Jerry, did you notice the two strangers who arrived on the stage last night?"

"Did I? Now you're a-shoutin', pard. I've got my optics on the precious pair, in view to ropin' 'em into a quiet leetle game afore I'm a day older. It strikes me very forcibly thar's plunder to be had in that quarter."

"Curse you for a fool, Jerry! Your zeal for skinning folks at poker is running away with what little horse sense ye ever possessed. Don't ye know, yer pesky idiot, that one of those chaps is this same Headlight Harry?"

"The devil, you say!"

"It's a fact, Jerry."

"An' who's the other galoot?"

"The engineer's pard, Rufe Ruffle."

"Whew! I'd never a-thought it! The chaps are made up mighty slick, an' no mistake. You've got blamed sharp eyesight, pard, to penetrate their disguise so quick."

"You give me undue credit, Jerry," returned Kirby, laughing, "since it was merely by accident that I discovered the truth."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, ye see, the two strangers entered the saloon awhile ago; and they hadn't be'n in the place ten minutes before Teaser Tom came waltzing in, full to the muzzle and looking for gore. He run up against the engineer, and then for a few minutes there was the biggest kind of circus. In the fracas the stranger's wig and beard fell to the floor, and to my great astonishment, Headlight Harry stood revealed. He seemed greatly disconcerted at the exposure, and hastened to rearrange his head-gear and leave the place, evidently fearing recognition. But, he was hardly quick enough to evade the argus eyes of King Kirby. Ha, ha, ha!"

Black Jerry stared at the speaker, a puzzled expression upon his evil countenance.

"What's that you're sayin', pard? The young tenderfoot left the place after running up ag'in' the Teaser?"

"That's just what I said."

"An' where, in the name of Satan, was the Teaser?"

"Reclining gracefully on his back, toes up, with his cronies pouring whisky down his throat by the pint, in the effort to bring him back to consciousness."

"Great hoppin' horn-toads! Ye don't mean to tell me the tenderfoot knocked out the Teaser?" cried Black Jerry, in blank amazement.

"Ay, that he did, Jerry; and after the most approved fashion, too. Why, he sailed in like a Sullivan, and I reckon the Teaser never knew what struck him. Headlight Harry is no slouch, even though he is a tenderfoot; and his companion is a man of the same caliber, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

"Well, pard, what brings the pair into Satan's Camp? D'ye s'pose they're nosin' round after old Goff's treasure?"

"Of course! What other object could they have? They're after the gold cache, sure enough, but I allow it'll be many a day before they feast their optics on the same. I've got certain ideas of my own regarding the ownership of that cache, and there's apt to be trouble in store for the man who interferes with my plans."

Black Jerry nodded approvingly as he helped himself to another glass of whisky.

"That's the idea, eggsackly, pardner! We hold a first mortgage on the yellow stuff, an' I opine these galoots from the East 'll find this climate so durned unhealthy that they'll wish they'd a-stuck to their railroad-in', instead o' monkeyin' with the wolves of Satan's Camp."

"Now, Jerry, let's come right down to

business, without further palaver. Of course you know why I have sent for you. This precious pair must be effectually squelched, and that, too, without delay. I shall depend on you to see that the job is properly done."

"You kin rely on me, you bet! What d'ye want done with the lambs?"

"I want them tucked away in a safe place where they can't interfere with my plans. That will suffice for the present. I will decide what final disposition to make of them a little later on."

"All kerrect, pard! It shall be as you say. Have ye any orders to give as to how the job shall be carried out?"

"Oh, no; I'll leave that to your own discretion, Jerry. I place great confidence in your ability, knowing as I do your extensive experience in that peculiar line."

"Thank ye for the compliment, pard," chuckled the minor ruffian, helping himself to yet another drink. "Your confidence is not misplaced. The tenderfeet shall be roped in this very night."

"The sooner the better, Jerry. Pick your men with great care, and let there be no bungling, for these chaps are full of sand and will show fight if you give 'em half a chance."

"I'll rope 'em in so neatly they won't have time to pull trigger," declared Black Jerry, confidently. "I know jest the boys for the job, pard, an' I'm off this very minnit to git the gang together," and the gambler, rising to go, calmly appropriated a handful of the finest cigars, an act which provoked a sarcastic smile from his companion.

"Confound you, Jerry, I'd rather keep you a week than a fortnight! Your capacity for cigars and whisky is equaled only by your marvelous dexterity at cards. Off with you, now; and don't forget to report the result of your labors at the earliest possible moment."

"Depend on me, pard; it shall be done," was Black Jerry's response, as the two plotters descended the stairs together, the King entering his saloon while the other hurried jubilantly away, eager to complete his plan for the capture of the Railroad Pardes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPIDER'S WARNING.

MEANTIME, the Railroad Pardes penetrated the numerous nooks and corners of the camp, viewing with interest its stirring scenes, and employed eyes and ears to such good advantage that at nightfall they were considerably wiser in the strange ways of life in Satan's Camp.

They would have felt decidedly less at ease, however, had they known that sharp eyes were watching them at every step, and that that cunning rascal, Black Jerry, was devising a scheme by which to bring about their destruction.

At an early hour in the evening the young railroaders sought their room at the hotel. Satan's Camp was just preparing for its customary night of carouse.

Miners came in from the neighboring gulches, while from their lairs the camp wolves in the disguise of sports, gamblers and bad men came forth for the feast and harvest. The saloons and gambling dens were, before darkness had fully closed over the camp, in full blast.

The Railroad Pardes, however, had no inclination to mingle in the mad revelry of drink, gaming and "fun." Prudence forbade any unnecessary exposure in a place where a stranger who ventured abroad after nightfall might be said to carry his life in his hand.

Accordingly they sought their room, to talk matters over and to arrange plans for their future movements.

Securing the door and window, they stretched themselves upon the rude bed that formed the chief article of furniture, and

proceeded to discuss the situation which certainly was one of unexpected danger and difficulty.

Not until that day had they realized the exceeding peril of their undertaking. Here they were in the heart of Satan's Camp, scarcely a stone's throw from the gilded den of their arch-enemy, King Kirby, who possessed the cipher that was the true clew to Gideon Goff's millions; and yet, with the legacy so near, the prospect of securing it had never seemed so dim as at that moment; and even Headlight Harry, usually so sanguine, was inclined to look upon the enterprise as a "Tom fool's errand" of the most extravagant description.

"Wa-al, pard," yawned Rufe Ruffle, after the situation had been discussed, "there's no use chinnin' here all night, when we orter be snatchin' a wink o' sleep. Who knows but what a good night's rest 'll bring fresh ideas to our noddles in the morning? I for one kin sleep like a top, in spite o' them screechin' catamounts below."

"Indeed, I should enjoy a short nap, myself, Rufe," returned Headlight Harry. "However, we cannot both indulge in that luxury at the same time, for we are surrounded by unscrupulous scoundrels, and there's no telling what deviltry may be attempted. We must take turns at sleeping, pard; so here goes a cent to decide who shall stand the first watch."

The coin was tossed, and Rufe Ruffle won.

"That's luck!" he ejaculated. "I'm off to the land o' Nod. Don't fail to rouse me if anything suspicious turns up. Great jumpin' bull frogs! This is a great kentry where a chap can't enjoy a quiet snooze without havin' a guard stand by his virtuous couch to keep off the red-handed assassin. I wish to goodness I was safe in my leetle bunk at home."

With which expression he turned upon his side, and in a few moments was sleeping soundly, while his watchful comrade sat close by and silently maintained a solitary vigil.

For more than an hour Harry sat within the darkened room, idly listening to the drunken revelry below. Suddenly he was aroused by a sharp, cracking sound in the direction of the window. It was as though a pebble or other small object had been tossed lightly against the pane.

Noiselessly the engineer leaped to his feet, while, as he did so, the peculiar noise was repeated. To touch the shoulder of his sleeping comrade and whisper a word of caution in his ear was but the work of an instant. Rufe was immediately wide-awake and ready for any emergency.

Together they waited breathlessly for a repetition of the sound. It speedily came, and with it these words, spoken in peculiar squeaky tones, were wafted distinctly to their ears:

"Hist! Are ye awake, up there? If so, show yer noddles at ther winder; I've got somethin' mighty important to tell ye."

The Pards exchanged significant glances.

"That's Spider, the hunchback," whispered Rufe, positively. "I'd know that queer voice o' his anywhere."

"Then there's something in the wind. We must learn what it is!" declared Harry, as he started for the window.

"Look out there, pard—look out for treachery! Who knows but what that ugly leetle imp is ready to plump a bullet inter ye the minnit ye show yer head?"

"I reckon there's no cause for alarm on that score. A chap who is ridiculed and tormented by the whole camp can scarcely be dangerous to his only friend. On the contrary I opine he is here to serve us."

Nevertheless, Headlight Harry took the precaution to expose himself as little as possible, as he cautiously raised the window and peered into the darkness without. The

squat, ungainly figure of the dwarf could be dimly seen, as he waited impatiently below.

"Hist! Don't make so much noise, I tell ye!" he admonished, as Harry at length appeared. "There's them around as 'd riddle me with lead if they cotched me hyar, an' I ha'n't hankerin' for no sich dose ter-night."

"All right; I understand," returned the engineer, in a cautious undertone. "Who are you, anyhow, and what's up?"

"I'm the Spider, I am; an' I've come to warn you two galoots that the sooner ye puckachee from Satan's Camp the better it'll be for yer health."

"We have already reached the same conclusion, my friend," returned Headlight Harry, grimly. "But is there anything particular in the wind? Speak out, my man!"

"Then listen! There's a plot on foot to wipe ye out. The plan is to tackle ye hyar, to-night, for the gang expects to find ye both sound asleep an' rope ye in without much trouble. Ye see, I overheard the galoots discussin' the hull bizness, so I immetjetly legged it over hyar to give ye the tip, for, durn me if I wanter see two innercent tenderfeet git roped in by that ornery gang."

"We are greatly indebted to you for this kindness, Spider, and you shall be rewarded if we escape the toils of our enemies. Thanks to your timely warning, they shall find us up and dressed and ready to receive visitors. We'll give 'em a reception they little expected, I reckon."

"Don't be fools enuff to stay hyar an' show fight!" admonished the hunchback, gravely. "Why, you'll git chawed inter shoestrings in about three minnits if ye do."

"Oh, we're not such innocent tenderfoots as we might be, Spider," assured Harry. "My pard and I have had scrimmages, before this, and have always managed to come out on top. I suppose that precious ruffian, Tom the Teaser, is at the head of this game of murder?"

"Not by a durn sight, stranger. Black Jerry is the galoot w'ot's engineerin' the job; but I reckon the boss gambler, King Kirby, is really at the back o' the hull bizness."

The Railroad Pards were startled at this announcement. The mere fact that Kirby was directing the movement was ample evidence that he was aware of their identity; and now fully they realized their peril.

"This is, indeed, alarming," declared the engineer, "if it is true that the boss gambler is at the bottom of this mischief; so I reckon we've got a pretty hard row to hoe."

"Now ye'r talkin', stranger. If ye fight King Kirby's gang, then ye've got ter tackle the hull durn camp. Don't think o' showin' fight, but take a fool's advice an' light out while ye have half a chance. Mebbe ye can't escape, even now, for there's no tellin' how many spies are on the watch; but it'll be a durn sight wiser to make the attempt than to stay here an' git wiped out, sure pop."

The dwarf, while speaking, had continued to glance uneasily from side to side, as if solicitous for his own safety and impatient to quit the spot.

"Now, strangers, I reckon I can't help ye any more at present. I've give ye the straight tip, an' the rest remains for ye to do. If ye'r sensible, ye'll make tracks without delay, for in less'n half an hour this place 'll be too hot to hold ye. I shall be prowlin' round close at hand, however, an' may have a chance to help ye out a leetle. In that case ye kin count on the Spider ev'ry time; but jest now I'm inclined to puckachee afore the bullets begin to fly."

So saying, the grotesque being flitted away like a shadow, leaving the pards filled with consternation at the imminence of their danger.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAPTURE.

For some moments the luckless treasure-hunters stared at one another in questioning. What was to be done? Rufe Ruffle was the first to break the painful silence.

"Great hoppin' horn-toads! Pard, I reckon our goose is cooked this time, an' no mistake," he exclaimed.

"The prospect is decidedly dubious, I must admit, but we must find some method of circumventing the scoundrels," returned Headlight Harry, with a sorry attempt at decision.

"We've got to do some mighty tall hustling, then. Those chaps are liable to turn up at any minnit, an' when they arrive, things are goin' to be kinder unpleasant for two innercent leetle lambs about our size an' complexion. Blast that King Kirby! How did he drop to our leetle game so soon?"

"The fellow is a very fiend incarnate. Once in his power we need expect no mercy. Yes, Rufe; if we would escape the clutches of this devil's adjutant we must rustle!"

"Well, pard, you're furnishin' the brains for this partnership, I reckon. What d'ye propose to do?"

"Only two alternatives, Rufe: to stay here and face the music, or get out of camp as quickly as possible."

"It would be suicidal, pard, to stay and fight. I reckon we'd better pick up our heels an' puckachee, as our friend, the humpy, calls it."

But Headlight Harry gravely shook his head, as he gazed intently through the open window out into the black, starless night. From the doors and windows of the neighboring saloons bright rays of light illumined the inky blackness, revealing a number of shadowy forms that flitted lightly hither and thither, ever hovering near the building that sheltered the pards.

"Do you see those fellows out there, Rufe? They are watching this house, or I'm very much mistaken. Pard, it would be useless for us to seek safety in flight, for I believe we are spied upon so closely that our escape would instantly be discovered, and we would both be shot down ere we had gone a hundred yards."

"Holy tom-cats! That's a pretty how-d'ye do! W'ot the deuce are we goin' to do? gasped the fireman.

"Remain where we are."

"An' be cotched like rats in a trap—"

"Not much, if we can prevent it. Of course I'm not fool enough to think of fighting King Kirby's gang; but I mean to outwit the scoundrels by stratagem."

"Out with it, pard,—out with it!" exclaimed Rufe Ruffle, eagerly. "If you've got an idea, for the love of Christopher Columbus trot it out, an' relieve a poor fellow from suspense."

"Well, my scheme is to ascend to the roof, and remain there until the expected assault is made. Of course the gang will burst into this room, and, seeing the window wide open, will naturally conclude that we have escaped by that means, eluding their guards in the darkness. Then, I calculate there will be a grand rush to find our trail, while we will improve the opportunity to descend from our perch and make a break for the hills, with very good prospects of escaping amid the general confusion."

Rufe Ruffle looked quizzically at the speaker.

"That's a mighty slick plan," he commented; "but it strikes me you've overlooked the most important point."

"How's that?"

"Why, you say this place is surrounded by spies, so how the dickens d'ye expect to climb to the roof without bein' diskivered?"

Headlight Harry smiled, in no wise disconcerted, as he answered:

"I mean to reach the roof, unseen, from the interior of this room. To be sure, there

is no skylight, but I fancy it will prove no difficult task to make an opening that will answer our purpose.

The "hotel" was a large, two-storied frame structure, put together in the careless, slap-dash manner so characteristic of houses built in a hurry. The walls, floors and partitions were all of rough pine boards, merely nailed to scantling, not morticed or lap-jointed. The roof was flat, being simply a flooring of inch boards. There was no lathing nor plastering, such things being unknown luxuries in Satan's Camp.

Harry had carefully noted all these features of the building, and this knowledge now communicated to Rufe, they at once proceeded to carry out the plan suggested, working with all caution yet with a vigor that evidenced their anxiety.

The room was low-studded, and by standing upon the bed they readily reached the ceiling. It was but the work of a few moments with their united strength to uplift and shove aside two of the boards. This led them into the low loft above the ceiling, into which they quickly made their way; and then, a heavy pressure on the low slanting roof-boards quickly opened a passage to the roof.

Replacing the ceiling boards carefully so as to disguise their mode of exit from the room the two pards stepped forth upon the roof, ready for further procedure.

And none too soon had they acted, for scarcely had they reached the outer air when the tread of heavy feet and the hum of voices came from the street below, indicating that a large party was approaching. A moment later the new-comers were heard to enter the saloon.

"Hyar they cum, pard! Now look out for fun," whispered Rufe Ruffle, eagerly, as the two crouched low on the roof.

"See that your shooters are in good trim, old fellow," was the engineer's admonition. "If the worst comes and we are discovered, we'll give the rascals a red-hot reception. Hark! Here they come!"

There was a sudden rush of feet up the creaking stairs, followed by a chorus of vengeful yells as the gang dashed straight for the room so recently occupied by the Railroad Pard. The door was locked, but there was no pause, no demand for admission; the frail barrier went down with a crash before the fierce assault, when, with a whoop of victory, the ruffians swooped into the apartment; but only to pause in sudden astonishment as they realized the truth.

The room was empty, their prey had flown; and the open window seemed to indicate the manner of their exit.

Black Jerry looked first about the room, then at the window, and finally at the evil-faced proprietor of the place, who had followed them up-stairs.

"How's this, Pedro?" he demanded. "There's a big mistake somewhere. I reckon you've gone like a durned blunderin' fool, an' p'inted out the wrong room to us."

"Not much, pard," declared the hotel-keeper, positively. "The strangers entered this very room—I saw them with my own eyes! An' I've had a man stationed in the hallway ever since, with orders to keep a sharp watch on this door, an' see that the galoots didn't leave."

"But confound you, the fellows are not here. Can't ye see that the place is empty?"

"There's no secret about their disappearance, I reckon," and Pedro pointed suggestively to the open window.

But, Black Jerry gave an impatient gesture, as if to show his utter disbelief in that theory.

"D'ye think I'm a durned fool?" he cried. "Why, I've had a line o' men circling this ranch for the past two hours, an' nobody could leave the place without diskivery. No, sir-ee! This hyar open winder racket won't go down with an' old bird like me. Them

galoots are still stowed away somewhere in this hyar caboose, an' don't ye forgit it, neither!"

And so firmly convinced was the shrewd scamp that such was the case, that he instantly ordered a thorough search of the building. In prompt obedience the man-hunters hastened away, searching the various apartments, and peering into every nook and corner large enough to contain a human form.

Meantime, crouching upon the roof above, with weapons ready, the Pard watched and waited. The conversation of the group below was perfectly audible to them, and Black Jerry's orders to search the house thrilled them with sudden apprehension, for it was evident that cunning scoundrel suspected something of the truth. What if he should take a notion to search the roof?

The fugitives listened breathlessly to the movements of their enemies, as the latter continued to ransack the building up-stairs and down. But, shrewd though the ruffian was, the mystery of their disappearance proved too deep for Black Jerry's brain to solve; and presently he was heard to abandon the hunt, and summon his men into the open air.

"I reckon ye'r right, Pedro," he growled. "We've hunted high an' low, an' there's no trace o' ther durned galoots inside the she-bang. They must ha' went through the winder, for sure; but hang me for a boss-thief if I kin imagine how they managed to slip by the gang. But come on, boys! We'll have 'em, yet, blast their ugly hides, for they can't be far away!" and Black Jerry led his murderous gang away, leaving the "hotel" to assume its wonted aspect, while the lurking fugitives listened to their departure with intense relief.

"Pard, you're a dandy schemer an' no mistake. The trick has worked like a charm," Rufe Ruffle chuckled, in high glee. "How slick we fooled the durned wolves, to be sure! Say, pard, it'd be a huge joke to sneak back to our room when the coast is clear, an' appear to that scoundrel, Pedro, in the mornin' as though nothin' had happened. Wouldn't it set his thick head to thinkin', hey?"

"Perhaps that would be a good plan were our situation less desperate; but under the circumstances it would be advisable to light out from here on the double quick," was Headlight Harry's prompt rejoinder. "Since every denizen of this camp is our enemy, with the possible exception of the Spider, our lives will be no safer in broad daylight than at the present moment. So 'go' is the word."

"Right you are, pard! There's no disputin' that conclusion, I guess. And, since we're obliged to up an' git, I'm ready to make a break any time when you say the word."

"The sooner we start the better; but let us look out sharply to see if the coast is clear."

Creeping cautiously on hands and knees, the Railroad Pard proceeded to make a circuit of the roof, carefully scanning the camp in all directions.

Though long past midnight, Satan's Camp was still wide-awake, and the revels of her illustrious citizens continued unabated; but the saloons were now the center of attraction, and the streets were almost deserted. Nothing was to be seen or heard of Black Jerry's gang.

To all appearances the time being propitious for successful flight, the Pard decided to make the venture without further delay. The rear of the "hotel," being wholly in shadow was selected as the most favorable point from which to leave the roof.

The distance from the roof to the ground was fully twenty feet, but this did not deter the desperate young railroaders. Swinging

from the edge of the roof, they hung for a moment against the wall; then, simultaneously they dropped to the earth, alighting with catlike agility upon their feet.

In another moment the fugitives were stealthily making their way through the settlement, shaping a course that would eventually bring them to the wagon-trail leading south to Fortune City. The knowledge of their perilous position lent extraordinary caution to their movements, as, side by side, they flitted like phantoms through the gloomy night.

Studiously avoiding the saloons with their illuminated fronts, the Pard kept discreetly within the denser shadows, easily eluding the few nocturnal prowlers who chanced to be abroad; and their hearts beat high with renewed hope when at length they found themselves upon the very outskirts of the camp.

"Rufe," whispered the young engineer, in elation, as they paused for an instant to take breath, "it seems almost too good to be true, but I really believe we shall outwit our enemies, after all."

"Praise the Lord for that! I shall be tempted to go down on my marrowbones an' offer up thanksgivin' when we once git clear of this durn cantankerous place. Skin me for a muskrat if ever I struck sich a fire-eatin', sulphur-an'-brimstone smellin' lot o' devil's imps in all my born experience."

Alas! for the pards and their new-born hopes! They had slightly underestimated the cunning of their foes.

At the moment when escape seemed almost certain, a chorus of yells suddenly assailed their ears, while a score of forms leaped from the earth as if by magic. And loud above the echoing din arose the voice of Black Jerry:

"Hyar they are, boys! Hyar's yer game! Down with the durned galoots!"

Like vultures swooping upon their prey, the gang bore down upon the startled fugitives; then, for a moment, ensued a scene of wild excitement. The revolvers of the brave two spoke twice in swift succession, to be answered by the cries of their smitten victims. But then the scrimmage suddenly ceased, for the Railroad Pards, crushed to earth by superior numbers, lay bruised and senseless beneath a heap of struggling humanity—helpless prisoners in the hands of King Kirby's minions!

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE TRAIL.

It was a wild, desolate spot in the very heart of the mountains, over a mile from Satan's Camp, on which the rising sun looked serenely down, upon the morning succeeding the capture of the Railroad Pard. Dark-walled cliffs and beetling crags uprose on every hand, while massive boulders were scattered about in wild profusion, surrounded by a dense growth of scraggy trees and tangled underbrush.

Into this sequestered nook King Kirby's minions had conducted their luckless captives, and now, at the dawn of day, the latter were to be seen bound hand and foot and closely guarded. They sat side by side upon the ground, leaning against a boulder; and it needed but a glance at their countenances to indicate the state of their feelings at this unexpected turn of affairs.

The guards were six in number, stout, muscular fellows, armed to the teeth. They evidently regarded their duty as a very soft snap, which called for no particular watchfulness on their part, for they had retired to a sheltered nook a dozen yards away, and were now deep in the mysteries of a poker game, with only an occasional glance in the direction of the prisoners.

The Railroad Pards, however, were enabled to profit nothing by this apparent lack of vigilance on the part of the sentinels, since their bonds were so secure as to pre-

the all possibility of release or escape from their position. They could only remain there, like trussed-up fowls, and discuss the situation in mournful tones.

"Wal, pard, I reckon our goose is cooked this time, sure pop," said Rufe Ruffle, dolefully. "These durned rascals have had the bad luck for us to nip our little scheme in the bud, an' I'll allow we're pretty small pertaters at the present time. Je-rusalem! How the galoots did pile down onter us! I'm sore from head to foot from the maulin' I got."

"Ay, Rufe, our present situation could scarcely be worse," admitted Headlight Harry, in whose grave countenance could be seen nothing of its customary cheerfulness. "I'm free to admit that my brilliant scheme for outwitting the enemy has proved a most dismal failure. Confound the luck! It's exasperating to be nabbed so neatly at the last minute, when triumph seemed almost assured."

"I reckon that cuss, Black Jerry, isn't so big a fool as he looks. It seems that he suspected the truth, after all, an' his pretended departure was but a clever ruse to draw us from our hole. An' we, like a pair o' darn-fool idiots, walked straight into the trap that was set for us!"

"I am mystified, Rufe, to know what the scoundrels intend to do with us, now that we are wholly in their power. I had expected we would be shot down in cold blood, but the fact that we have been brought to this out-of-the-way spot would seem to indicate that Kirby has some particular object in view."

"I s'pose he thinks an ordinary death is too good for us," muttered the fireman grimly, "so he's jest stowed us away here in safe keepin' until his master mind kin conjure up some infernal torture that 'll be better suited to the enormity of our offense. Meantime, we're at liberty to make our wills, say our prayers, an' cuss the evil hour when we ventured like a pair o' born fools inter this nest o' human vultures, all for a show at a dead man's treasure."

"No punishment can be too severe for that fiend, King Kirby, to inflict upon his victims, I'm afraid," was Headlight Harry's response. "We need expect no mercy from a villain who would deliberately place an innocent man upon the track as he did, to be crushed and mangled by the first passing train. Alas! the miner's treasure seems destined to be our Jonah. I'm afraid we shall never live to finger those precious nuggets."

"Cuss the precious nuggets! Satan fly away with the hull durned bizness! All I ask, now, is freedom. I'd give five years o' my life to be perched at this very minnit in the cab of old Number Nine."

"And I," hissed the engineer, as he glared fiercely at the distant guards, "woud give a half interest in my prospective fortune for one blessed minute of liberty, with a good revolver in my hand. I'd break up yon poker game so quick—Hello! What's the matter with you?"

For Rufe Ruffle had suddenly given a violent start, and was now staring straight ahead with an expression upon his face that betokened some interesting discovery.

"Hist, pard!" he whispered, cautiously. "Jest cast your eagle eye along the cliff behind the guards, an' tell me if ye see anything unusual. I'll swear I saw some object movin' with the caution of a panther there in the bushes."

The spot in question was a ledge which rose precipitously to a considerable height, its crest being strewn with small boulders and densely fringed with bushes. It towered directly behind the group of card-players, who sat upon the ground at its very base.

As the captive railroaders continued to watch the top of the cliff, they were suddenly electrified to see a human hand thrust

through the bushes, and waved warningly toward them! An instant later the mysterious hand was followed by its owner, and, to the utter amazement of the Railroad Pards, the squat, ungainly shape of the Spider was revealed!

Only for an instant did the dwarf expose himself to view, meanwhile making what were doubtless intended as encouraging gestures to his friends below; then, shaking his fist threateningly at the gamblers, he vanished as abruptly as he had appeared.

What a thrill of exultation swept through the breast of the amazed young treasure-seekers, as they witnessed this unexpected scene! Dark despair yielded at once to renewed hope and courage, at the welcome discovery that a friend was near at hand, seeking to accomplish their rescue!

"The dwarf hasn't gone back on us, after all," whispered Headlight Harry. "He's right on deck an' ready for biz! It won't be long before we hear from him, you may depend on it."

With joyously-beating hearts, the Railroad Pards eagerly watched and waited for the materialization of the Spider, while the six ruffians serenely continued their game, blissfully ignorant of the interesting tableau that had just been enacted.

Meantime, the dwarf was at work after his own peculiar fashion, seeking the liberation of the strangers to whom he had become so suddenly attached.

True to his promise, the Spider had kept a watchful eye upon the gambler's hirelings from the very moment that he parted from the Railroad Pards at the "hotel," after warning them of their danger. He had been a near but unseen witness to the exciting scrimmage that resulted in the capture of the escaping men, and had overheard Black Jerry give his men directions to conduct their prisoners to a certain spot in the mountains. No sooner had the six chosen ruffians departed with their bound and therefore helpless captives, than the resolute hunchback was also on the way to the same rendezvous. He did not follow the party, being perfectly familiar with the location of the spot indicated, but struck boldly out in a trail over the hills.

It was daybreak when he reached the designated locality, and, after some reconnoitering, he was enabled to locate the exact position of the ruffians and their prisoners. From his commanding position at the top of the cliff, he peered down into the little glen which had been chosen for the camp.

The Spider's first move was to attract the attention of the captives and apprise them of his presence; and how successfully he accomplished this purpose, without exciting the suspicions of the guards, we have seen. This done, however, a far more difficult problem presented itself to the would-be rescuer. How was he to achieve the proposed rescue, single-handed, with the odds six to one against him?

True, he could shoot down one man—perhaps two—from the very spot where he stood, before the gang could realize what had happened; but this would still leave so strong a force to cope with that his own death or capture must be the inevitable result of the effort.

This conviction dawned upon the hunchback as he crouched in the leafy covert, glaring like a hunted wolf upon the group of card-players below, and nervously fingering his revolver as though unable to further resist the impulse to send a bullet flying into their midst; but, great as was the temptation to this vengeful child of the wilderness, the prudence of calm reason curbed his mad desire for blood.

Having abandoned the idea of attacking the entire gang, single-handed, the dwarf, far from being discouraged, resorted at once to strategy to accomplish his purpose. It was his object now to reach the two captives

and set them at liberty, if possible, thus decreasing the odds three-fold, and increasing in equal proportions the chances for success in the subsequent fight with the guards.

To accomplish this feat it would be necessary to make a wide detour, passing entirely around the glen, and approaching it again from the opposite side.

It was a movement fraught with peril, and success was by no means assured, but the intrepid Spider did not hesitate to make the attempt. He immediately backed away from the cliff, and moved through the woods with stealthy, cat-like tread.

But the would-be rescuer's plan was doomed to sudden interruption, for he had proceeded scarcely two hundred yards when he made a most surprising discovery. There, not twenty feet away and directly in his path, he beheld the slender, boyish figure of a stranger, who was seated carelessly on a boulder, his elbows on his knees and his head between his hands, the picture of one who was lost in contemplation. His back was turned to the dwarf, and he sat apparently oblivious of the latter's stealthy approach.

An evil grin distorted the Spider's face, and his hand sought a pistol-butt as he moved stealthily toward the unsuspecting stranger.

"Han's up, mister!"

The dwarf's harsh warning grated upon the ears of the unknown, who instantly leaped to his feet and confronted the intruder. A low cry of amazement escaped his lips as he beheld the impish being who stood there, grinning ghoulishly, with a revolver leveled at his head; but his handsome face evinced no trace of fear, nor was there the slightest tremor in his voice as he replied:

"All right, partner! You've got the drop, I see; so there's no use kickin'. What's your little game, anyway? If it's plunder you're after, I opine you've tackled the wrong chicken. However, you're welcome to what little I possess."

The youth had promptly elevated his hands in obedience to the hunchback's command, and now he nonchalantly resumed his seat on the boulder.

As for the Spider, he continued to stare at the unknown with an expression of mingled surprise and curiosity upon his ugly face.

"See hyar, young feller," he exclaimed, at length; "I reckon you've mistook my purpose. It hain't plunder I'm after, not by a durn sight, but jest a leetle straight information."

"Indeed! It's truly a relief to know that my valuables are safe," laughed the youth. "But, what sort of information are you seekin' at the pistol's point, my friend? Let me advise you in advance that I'm no walk-in' intelligence bureau."

"Ye kin answer w'ot I want'er know, I reckon," growled the hunchback, in response. "Now, look a-hyar, you're a stranger in these parts, I opine. Who are ye, anyway? an' w'ot are ye doin' hyar? That's w'ot I want'er know, d'ye see?"

"In answer let me tell you, then, that I am a white man, free born and partly civilized; an' as to what I'm doin' here, I reckon that's none o' your confounded bizness. Now, how does the information suit you?"

"Ho, ho, ho! You're a sassy young cuss, blame my ugly hide if ye ha'n't," chuckled the Spider. "Now, see hyar: that's no need o' gittin' yer back up, jest because ye'r asked a civil question. Keep yer information if ye want'er; I reckon I don't need it, anyhow, since I've got yer pedigree down purty fine, a'ready."

"Indeed!"

"Oh, yes; I'm onter ye, young feller! You're the very identical galoot who beat off the road-agents two nights ago, while comin'

in on the stage, an then skeddaddled so quick that Ole Nick hisself couldn't tell where ye went to. Now, haven't I hit the bull's-eye sonny?"

"Well, supposin' I am the individual you refer to, what of it?"

"Simply this: I reckon you're acquainted with the two fellers who cum in on the stage that night, the two tenderfeet, I mean!"

"Well?"

"Are you a friend o' theirs?"

"Surely, I have no reason to be an enemy."

"Then put it there, stranger!" cried the dwarf, in sudden delight. "You're a friend to the tenderfeet, so am I! I reckon we're well met."

All signs of hostility on the Spider's part vanished as if by magic; the deadly revolver was instantly restored to his belt, while he advanced with outstretched hand to greet the bold young stranger, whose exploits had created such a profound sensation in Satan's Camp.

The latter seemed not a little surprised at this sudden change of demeanor, but he did not hesitate to take the proffered hand.

"I accept your friendship, be it offered in all sincerity," he exclaimed; "but I must confess this whole proceeding is a mystery to me. Why are you so anxious about my late fellow-travelers? Are they in trouble—?"

"In trouble, hey? Holy smoke! They're at this very minnit in the wussett kind of a pickle ye kin imagine—bound hand an' foot in the clutches o' King Kirby's gang."

"Great Heavens! Where?—in Satan's Camp?"

"No; within a pistol-shot o' this very spot."

The flushed face and excited manner of the stranger plainly indicated his anxiety, and the Spider, having satisfied himself that he had happily encountered a true friend of the prisoners, now lost no time in revealing the true state of affairs to his eager listener.

"The poor fellows shall be rescued—I swear it!" cried the handsome unknown, in grim determination, when he had learned the truth. "We must strike boldly in their behalf, an' that, too, without a moment's delay."

"Right ye air, pard. There's no time to lose, I reckon. There's only six o' the cusses below there, now, but no tellin' when the rest o' the gang 'll come on; so it behooves us to git a move on an' strike afore the odds git too all-fired heavy. I s'pose ye'r well-armed, stranger?"

"You can bet!" was the ready response. "Lead on to the scene of action, pard, I'm eager for the music to begin."

The Spider chuckled in demoniacal glee as he cut a grotesque caper on the ground.

"Good! We'll make the fur fly in great style when we turn ourselves loose on the gang," he declared, elatedly. "Sure, we're only two an' they are six, but we'll strike 'em onexpected, d'ye see, an' I opine we kin wipe out the hull caboodle afore they kin find time to strike a lick. Now, stranger, foller me close, an' move as though ye'r walkin' on aigs, for everything depends on our ketchin' 'em off their guard."

With noiseless strides the catlike hunchback moved away, while close at his heels followed the handsome young unknown, entering with zeal into the mission of rescue.

CHAPTER VII.

TO THE RESCUE.

FULLY an hour had elapsed since the lurking dwarf first made his presence known to the Railroad Pards, and the latter, waiting vainly for some further demonstration, were now fast becoming discouraged at the delay. Was it possible that the Spider, unable to devise a means of rescue, had abandoned them to their fate? The thought was most disagreeable, and the prisoners again felt their spirits droop as the moments went

slowly by, and yet no sign from the hunchback.

That the latter was still at hand, however, was finally evidenced in a most decided manner; for, as the anxious young railroaders continued to wistfully scan the top of the cliff, it was to suddenly see repeated the same maneuver that had first attracted their attention!

Again were the bushes cautiously pulled aside, but this time, to the great amazement of the beholders, two faces instead of one looked down into the glen. The first was easily recognizable as the repulsive "phiz" of the Spider, but the other was withdrawn so quickly that but an indistinct glimpse was obtainable. For an instant the hideous dwarf glared down upon the scene; then he, too, disappeared, while the Railroad Pards, thrilled with sudden hope, glanced significantly at one another.

"Did you see that, Rufe?" was the cautious whisper.

"I reckon I hain't blind, pard."

"The dwarf has secured reinforcements, it seems. Now, who can his new ally be, I wonder?"

"That's jest wot beats me, old man. I didn't s'pose there was anybody within forty miles o' Satan's Camp who could be hired to strike a lick in our behalf."

"Ah! you have forgotten our late traveling companion, the remarkable youth who vanished so mysteriously on the evening of our arrival. The young fellow must now be somewhere in this neighborhood, and it's dollars to doughnuts that the Spider has met with him and secured his co-operation."

"I believe you're right, pard! Anyway, the mystery 'll soon be explained, I reckon, for our friends mean bizness this time, an' no mistake. Jest look there!"

It was a truly significant movement that now attracted their eager gaze. As before stated, the top of the ledge was strewn with fragments of rock of various weights and sizes; and one of these, a huge, rounded mass weighing nearly a ton, was poised within a yard of the verge, and exactly above the guards! And now, as the prisoners looked upward, it was to see this ponderous mass slowly but surely moving forward, as though propelled from behind by strong and sinewy hands.

There was no mistaking the purpose of the Spider and his new-found ally. In another moment that massive boulder would descend upon the ruffians, who still sat deeply engrossed in their game, utterly oblivious of their imminent peril.

Even as the astonished captive Railroad Pards gazed, the huge mass, poised for an instant on the very verge of the cliff, suddenly pitched forward and fell with a thunderous crash into the very midst of the doomed guards.

Cries of mingled agony and rage followed this descent of the boulder, for two of the ruffians lay crushed beneath the ponderous mass, while their companions scrambled to their feet in sudden surprise and terror. At the same instant the two rescuers appeared at the top of the ledge, and opened fire upon the bewildered enemy. Crack! Crack! Crack! sounded the pistol-shots in swift succession, while above the crash of firearms, arose the ear-splitting yell of the Spider, as he danced like a demon on the cliff above.

One ruffian—then another—went down before that deadly fusillade, while the two survivors, both seriously wounded, made a breakneck dash for safety, rushing madly among trees and boulders in their efforts to escape. Fast though they flew, the Spider's lead was faster, and the hindmost scoundrel fell, shot through the head, ere he had fled a dozen yards.

Not even then, however, was the wrath of the demon dwarf appeased. Determined that not a single enemy should escape, he scrambled down the steep declivity, and

with tigerish bounds sped after the surviving ruffian, who by this time was disappearing down the glen.

Meantime, his less bloodthirsty comrade descended more leisurely into the glen, and approached the Railroad Pards, who had remained eager witnesses to this brief but sanguinary encounter.

"Well, pards, this is a pretty fix I find you in, trussed up like a pair of fowls in the cook's oven" was his cheery salutation, as he hastened to relieve the prisoners of their bonds. "I little thought that when we met again it would be under such peculiar circumstances."

In a moment the liberated railroaders had struggled to their feet, and were shaking the hands of their dashing deliverer.

"This is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure," exclaimed Headlight Harry. "It seems to me that some good fairy has deputed you as the guardian of our welfare, for this is the second time within a few hours that you have been instrumental in getting us out of difficulty."

"In this case the credit should be given to your friend, the dwarf," was the laughing response. "But for him I should probably still be in ignorance o' your disagreeable situation, though I was scarcely a stone's throw away when he discovered me."

"Lucky for us that you met so opportunely, for we had begun to give up all hope of rescue. Let me assure you that we are duly grateful to you both, while, as for yourself, in particular, this meeting is rendered doubly pleasant from the fact that we already feel somewhat acquainted—though it's true that you have never told us your name."

At this the youth started suddenly, evincing symptoms of no little embarrassment.

"Oh, names amount to nothing in these parts," he finally exclaimed, with a nervous little laugh. "Handsome Charlie is my latest handle; but, if you don't like the name, why call me anything you choose."

"I fancy it would be difficult to select a more appropriate title," was Headlight Harry's rejoinder, as both he and Rufe stared in unfeigned admiration at the handsome youth, who, flushing slightly before their ardent gaze, turned away in evident embarrassment.

At this moment the Spider suddenly reappeared. There was a perceptible limp to his gait, and his ugly face wore an expression of deep disgust.

"Well, Spider, what luck? Did you catch your man?" queried Headlight Harry, as he eagerly advanced to meet the dwarf.

"Curse it, no! The pesky imp got clear," was the fierce reply. "I would 'a' got him though, sure enuff, if I hadn't fell over a log and nearly broke my gol-durned neck. Confound the pesky luck!"

"Never mind, Spider! Let the ruffian wretch go! You have won a famous victory, nevertheless, and thanks to your noble efforts we are free once more. What more is to be desired?"

"Sure enuff, pard, you're free for the present, but your future liberty ha'n't assured yet, not by a durned sight. Why, that pesky galoot won't stop runnin' until he gets ter Satan's Camp, an' King Kirby 'll have his hull gang on our track as fast as they kin hoof it, you can bet high on that."

The Railroad Pards had to see the force of this startling suggestion.

"You're right, Spider; we're not yet out of the woods by any means," declared the engineer, gravely. "It's a pity indeed that the fellow escaped; but, now that the mischief is done we must make the best of it. What would you suggest as the wisest course to pursue?"

"Wal, pard, I opine it's impossible to leave the kentry altogether, 'cause the only way out of the mountings is by the south-west pass, an' the varmints 'll probably cover

ound so close that a jack-rabbit didn't git by unseen. I reckon the proper thing to do is to crawl inter some good hidin' place, and there wait for a more favorable chance to puckachee."

"Good sound advice which shall be promptly acted upon. Spider, can you guide us to a place that will afford concealment and safety from our now infuriated enemies?"

The hunchback hesitated but a moment ere vouchsafing an affirmative response.

"There's a place less'n a mile from here," said he, "that couldn't suit the purpose any better if you had it made to order. I've only be'n there once, an' that was several years ago, but I reckon I kin take ye to the spot without much trouble."

"Then lead on at once, for there's no time to waste," and Headlight Harry looked nervously from side to side, as though half expecting to see the enemy even then burst into view.

"Hold yer hosses, pard! Don't be in too big a rush!" advised the hunchback, coolly. "We've got a good start on the varmints, so we kin afford to take things tol'able easy; an' I reckon 'twill be a good scheme to kiver our tracks as much as possible, so's to set the rascals guessin'. Jest leave the hull bizness ter me, pards, an' I'll undertake ter git ye outer difficulty slicker'n a whistle."

Preparations were at once made for the retreat, the first step being to secure the weapons and ammunition of the five vanquished ruffians, which acquisition served to give the party much the appearance of a walking arsenal. Then, under the hunchback's careful directions, they hastened to leave the scene of the late encounter, proceeding for a short distance in a direction precisely contrary to that which it was intended to ultimately pursue, then making a wide detour, great care being taken to conceal all evidence of this abrupt change of course.

Thanks to the hard, stony nature of the soil, this was accomplished in a manner that might be safely calculated to deceive the enemy; and, having completed these maneuvers to his own satisfaction, the Spider now plunged boldly into the forest, shaping his course straight for the hidden retreat.

The route led through a dense growth of underbrush, in which progress was difficult and slow, especially to the Railroad Pards, who, lame and sore from their late ill-usage, limped painfully in the footsteps of their guide, crawling with difficulty over the innumerable boulders and fallen trees which strewed the way.

For nearly an hour the four continued to struggle through this unbroken wilderness, the hunchback leading the way with an unhesitancy that betokened his thorough knowledge of the region.

Finally the sound of rushing waters reached their ears, and they emerged from the thicket to find further progress barred by a swollen mountain creek, which rushed leaping and swirling on its course.

Here the Spider paused for a moment, looking keenly from side to side. Evidently he recognized the locality, for, with a self-satisfied chuckle, he turned his steps downstream, beckoning the others to follow.

A short distance below they came to where a gigantic pine had fallen squarely across the stream, furnishing a rude but adequate means of reaching the opposite side, dry shod.

Over the tree-trunk glided the dwarf with catlike agility, while his more cautious companions followed gingerly, one by one, until all had crossed in safety.

The creek on this side was bordered by a lofty bluff which rose precipitously almost from the water's edge, its cold gray side partially hidden by a mass of clinging vines. The bank between this towering rock-wall

and the water was barely wide enough to afford a foothold to the four wayfarers, who now carefully continued their way downstream.

At a point perhaps a hundred yards below the fallen pine, their guide suddenly paused and began a careful examination of the wall, pushing aside the tangled mass of vines here and there, evidently in quest of some particular object, or spot, while the others looked on in vague anticipation.

Their curiosity was satisfied a moment later, for the Spider gave a cry of exultation, and pointed triumphantly at a dark, irregular opening in the wall which his careful scrutiny had revealed.

"Hyar ye are, at last, pards! I knowed I couldn't miss the place, though I ha'n't b'en hyar for years," was his cheery exclamation, while the fugitives looked on in no little astonishment.

"A hole in the wall, eh? Where the dickens does it lead to?" cried Headlight Harry.

"This hyar is the mouth of a passage which runs straight into an inner cave. I explored the hull bizness one day, an' know it like a book. Come, pards; bundle in an' take a look at yer future dwellin'-place."

This singular tunnel entrance was but a few feet from the base of the cliff, being so small that a person could enter only on hands and knees. One by one the fugitives crawled into the cavity, while the vines which screened the opening were carefully replaced. The passage slanted slightly downward, and extended straight into the heart of the cliff for perhaps thirty feet, forming the entrance to a subterranean chamber of considerable proportions.

Such, at least, was the explanation vouchsafed by the Spider, and with it the fugitives were forced to rest content, since nothing was visible to their own eyes in the Stygian gloom which pervaded the place. They searched in vain for even a single match, by aid of which to catch a momentary glimpse of the surroundings.

"Wal, pards, what d'ye think o' yer new quarters?" chuckled the hunchback guide, as they stood in a huddled group within the dismal cavern. "Not very comfortable, I'll allow, but it's safety we're after about this time more'n anything else; an' I reckon we kin stay hyar till doomsday without bein' diskivered by the enemy."

"You're right, Spider; a more admirable hiding-place could hardly be imagined. True, a little light of some sort would make the place more congenial, but we can afford to overlook such trifles when we know that we are at last safe from pursuit."

"But I say, Spider," interposed Rufe Ruffle, in anxious tones, "ye don't happen to have a lunch-counter connected with this hyar ranch, do ye? This den is all right enuff to hide in, but I reckon if ye keep us hyar very long without grub, it's goin' to make things mighty unpleasant for the inner man."

The words of the fireman embodied an idea that had hitherto failed to occur to the fugitives, whose desire to escape the clutches of their enemies had risen paramount to all other considerations. To remain in the cavern for any length of time meant inevitable starvation; while to venture forth in quest of food would be fairly suicidal, in view of the fact that the vicinity would be likely to swarm with deadly foes.

In this dilemma an immediate council was held to devise some way of averting this new difficulty. It was finally decided that the Spider should pay a visit to Satan's Camp that very night, there to secure provisions and other necessities, and also if possible learn something of the intentions of the enemy. This was a duty which the dare-devil hunchback accepted with avidity, declaring his ability to carry out the plan successfully.

Of course this venture could be made only under cover of darkness, so the fugi-

tives were forced to make the best of their uncomfortable surroundings through the long, weary hours that intervened. Night came at last, however, and the dwarf made instant preparations for departure.

"Are you sure you can find your way back again, Spider?" queried Headlight Harry, anxiously, as he accompanied the spy to the entrance. "As the camp is fully three miles away, and the night is dark and starless, it seems to me almost a foolhardy venture for you."

"So much the better," grimly chuckled the hunchback. "Like an owl, I kin see best in the night, an' I know ev'ry foot o' the kentry hereabouts, so ye kin count on seein' me back about midnight. When ye hear three hoots o' the night-owl in succession, then expect to see the Spider soon after. So-long!"

He pushed through the mass of vines and vanished in the inky gloom, while the three fugitives, returning to the inner chamber, settled themselves to endure the wearisome hours that must elapse ere the spy's return.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

KING KIRBY, boss of Satan's Camp, sat alone within his private room on the evening following the capture and subsequent rescue of the Railroad Pards. His strangely handsome face wore an expression of doubt and anxiety that was in marked contrast with his customary air of ease and unconcern.

He was bending over a rough pine table, laden with the bountiful supply of cigars and liquid refreshments that were invariably on hand for his own exclusive use; but on this particular occasion the King seemed indifferent to the craving of his inner man.

With hands pressed tightly to his knitted brows, and his keen eyes fixed upon the single sheet of paper upon the table before him, the gambler presented the picture of one struggling with an annoying mystery.

"So, this is the wonderful secret cipher—the key to Gid Goff's treasure-cache!" fell slowly from his lips. "I'm a Dutchman if it isn't the queerest document I ever struck in all my travels. I've glanced at it a dozen times or more, but this is the first time I've had the courage to tackle it in earnest. Hang me if I can make head or tail to the pesky thing, anyhow!"

It was, indeed, the old miner's cipher writing that lay before the gambler, the original paper, which was scarcely larger than a postage-stamp, having been carefully pasted to a larger sheet in order to preserve it. This tiny scrap was closely covered with letters, evidently written in the juice of a berry with a sharp stick for a pen, and which had now faded almost to the point of illegibility. The inscription read as follows:

3	Q	Y	P	A	A	B	V	F
Z	Z	J	O	B	C	L	A	D
F	M	V	I	J	C	F	P	P
C	W	A	V	A	Q	B	W	W
A	A	A	M	A	S	A	M	9
O	B	I	S	W	M	X	W	6

Such was the curious cipher prepared by Gideon Goff as a guide to the hiding-place of his cherished gold, and which he had contrived with an ingenuity well calculated to bewilder the most intelligent mind. No wonder, then, that the rough and illiterate gambler contemplated this apparently meaningless jumble of character with the helpless air of one who is floundering in a labyrinth of impenetrable mystery.

"What durned tom-foolery is this, anyhow? I don't pretend to be a scholar, not by a blamed sight; but I did manage to learn my A B C when I was a kid, and I know there's no sort o' sense nor reason to this thing as it now stands. Confound the

old fool! Why in blazes didn't he write out his directions in good plain United States lingo, and not inflict upon his lawful heirs and legatees a lot o' hieroglyphics that would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to decipher?"

He pushed the paper aside and left the table in deep disgust, only to return a moment later, however, and renew the attack with increased vigor.

"Come, Kirby, old man, you mustn't give up so easily!" he exclaimed, cheerfully. "This puzzle must be solved, or you'll never live to finger the precious pile that lies concealed in yonder mountains. To search for it now, without a tangible clew, would be like looking for the traditional needle in a haystack. Everything depends on this bit of writing. The enigma can be—must be unraveled; an' I'm going to do it this very night, or bust in the attempt!"

Kirby bent to his task with a grim determination to "do or die," but he proceeded in the aimless, hesitating manner of one who was unable to hit upon any system or method of interpretation. He read the letters backward, downward, crosswise—he turned the paper upside down! He tried a dozen different ways that his tortured mind suggested. But all in vain! The cipher still remained the same to him—a confused and unintelligible jumble.

For more than an hour he pored over that mysterious inscription, while the dingy lamp by his side burned lower and lower, and fantastic shadows crept about the room. The blood-red letters seemed to have suddenly become imbued with life, and danced before the gambler's vision in the most tantalizing manner, as though mocking at his inability to penetrate their secret.

And still King Kirby struggled on, with a zeal and determination that was worthy of more satisfactory results. But he was fast losing both courage and patience, now. He glared like one distracted at the elusive cipher, while anathemas welled from his lips. Suddenly, unable to longer endure the strain, he jumped to his feet.

"Curse the gibberish! It will drive me mad!" and with a violent movement he hurled the precious paper from his hand.

It fluttered to the floor, close by the open window, where it lay unheeded by the irate gambler who, in a rage, strode up and down the room.

At this moment heavy footsteps on the stairs, followed by a peculiar rap at the door, announced the coming of Black Jerry, who had certainly chosen a most unfortunate time to visit his chief, for, when Kirby admitted his obedient servant, it was to vent upon him the spleen of his ugly mood.

"Ho, ho! So you're back again, are you? Curse you for a blundering idiot! Aren't you ashamed to show up around here, after making such an infernal mess o' things?"

To which greeting Black Jerry gave no outward sign of surprise or resentment. He had seen the boss of Satan's Camp in just such moods before, and knew from experience the value of discretion. Standing in silence before his irate chief, he meekly listened to the taunts.

"Oh, you're a brilliant specimen, you are—a star of the first magnitude! Next time I have a simple job to do, I'll engineer the biz myself, blast me for a Chinaman if I don't!"

Kirby resumed his interrupted walk, while his associate calmly took a seat, and reached for a cigar.

Finally Kirby paused abruptly before his waiting colleague.

"Well?" said he, inquiringly.

"Well, pard?"

"Do you bring good news or bad? Have you succeeded in rounding up those slippery young Easterners?"

Black Jack shook his head.

"Nary a time!" he answered. "The boys

have been busy all day, searchin' high an' low in ev'ry direction; but the galoots have covered their tracks so that it's wuss'n lookin' for a needle in a hay-mow. By this time they're hid securely—but only the devil himself knows where!"

"What's that you're saying? Not yet recaptured?" demanded the boss gambler, fiercely. "Then, what in the name of blue blazes are you loafing around here for, when your work is unaccomplished?"

"Well, pard, I reckon there's no sort o' use in keepin' the search up after dark, is there? The boys'd be in the same predicament as the nigger who went down cellar on a dark night, without a light, to look for a black cat that wasn't there."

"Confound your joking, Jerry! This is no time for such tom-foolery. I tell you those men must not be allowed to escape. Things have come to a pretty pass when a couple of tenderfeet can cut up such monkey tricks right here in Satan's Camp! Oh, yes, Jerry; you've made a pretty mess o' things this trip! It was only by accident you managed to catch the fellows at all, and then it was only to have them slip through your fingers like eels! You ought to be proud o' such a brilliant exploit!"

"I reckon, pard, we've got the galoots fast enuff. It's only a question of a 'few hours when we'll have 'em trapped 'gain,' confidently declared Jerry.

"Indeed? What makes you so sure of that?"

"The only way they can retreat is by the south pass through which runs the wagon-trail to Fortune City. Now, I've got that trail so strongly guarded I reckon a rabbit couldn't slip through without discovery. The runaways are hid away somewhere among the hills jest west o' the pass. Tomorrow, at daybreak, I shall have a hundred men scouring the hull mountain in search of 'em. Even should we fail to diskiver their hidin'-place, we will at least make the chase so hot that the innocents won't dare to venture forth, an' so will starve to death like rats in a trap."

"Ay, Jerry, I reckon there's small prospects of their escape in the long run," Kirby admitted, somewhat appeased by the plausible explanations of his satellite. "But let there be no further bungling or delay in this matter. The sooner those fellows are in my power again, the better it will suit me, and the better will you be likely to fare when we strike the hidden treasure."

Jerry's wicked black eyes glittered avariciously, while his mouth opened in an expansive grin.

"I always have that future reward in mind, you kin bet!" he chuckled. "When d'ye expect to make a strike for the old man's nuggets, anyway, if I may be bold enuff to ask? Durned if I ha'n't a-gittin' jest the least bit impatient over the delay."

"Just as soon as I succeed in getting at the meaning o' that infernal cipher, curse it!" growled the boss of Satan's Camp, and his brow darkened perceptibly at the bare recollection of that recent tussle with the elusive cryptogram. "Here I've b'en working for hours over the cursed thing, but not a bit of satisfaction can I get out of it! See here, Jerry, perhaps you can help me out! Are you a good hand at solving riddles?"

"Not of that pertickler breed, I reckon. Ye can't expect much enlightenment from a poor cuss whose education has b'en so sadly neglected that he can't tell A from Izzard," responded the rough, with a dubious shake of the head.

"Nevertheless, you shall have a look at the pesky thing. Here is the mysterious document, and—"

An imprecation followed from Kirby for, as he turned to look for the fallen paper, there, crouching like a panther at the open window, in the very act of leaping into the room, was the hideous figure of the Spider!

His face was distorted by an evil grin, his glaring eyes were fixed upon the gamblers in a look of deadly hate.

An inarticulate cry escaped the lips of the ugly being when he saw that he was discovered. Like a flash his arm was raised; then some object flew through the air with unerring aim, shattering the dingy lamp into a thousand fragments, and plunging the apartment into darkness. At the same instant the dwarf leaped catlike to the floor.

For a moment the two gamblers stood petrified with sudden fear and astonishment; then the King, with an execration, bounded forward to grasp the audacious intruder, while at the same time Black Jerry rushed to the open window to cut off his retreat.

But the dwarf's superior cunning proved too much even for their combined efforts. Slipping, eel-like, through Kirby's outstretched arms, he darted across the room, reaching the door before his would-be captors could realize what had happened. In another moment he was flying down the stairway to the saloon below.

After him in hot pursuit followed the exasperated gamblers, King Kirby being in advance, with Black Jerry close at his heels. On the topmost stair the former slipped and fell, while Jerry, unable to check himself in time, stumbled over the prostrate form of his chief, and together the precious pair rolled over and over down the steep incline, finally bringing up, bruised and breathless, in the midst of a startled group of loungers.

The Spider, meantime, had successfully made his way through the crowd that thronged the room; and now the discomfited pursuers struggled to their feet just in time to see his ugly figure vanish through the door, his mocking laughter ringing in their ears.

"After him, boys!" yelled King Kirby, in wild excitement. "Shoot him—shoot him down, somebody! Don't let the ugly imp escape!"

But, though a dozen men rushed eagerly in pursuit, it was only to find on reaching the open air that all traces of the fleeting dwarf had disappeared; and the boss of Satan's Camp could only curse in impotent fury at the clever way in which he had been outwitted.

But what was the object of the Spider's nocturnal visit? And why, after discovery, had he so strangely persisted in entering the room, in the very face of his enemies?

A sudden suspicion crossed King Kirby's mind as he asked himself these questions. Ripping out a horrible oath, he snatched up the nearest lamp, and hobbled up-stairs as quickly as his bruised and aching limbs would carry him.

Bursting into the room recently occupied, he looked eagerly for the precious paper which, in a fit of passion, he had thrown to the floor. It was just as he had feared, the cipher was gone; and the object of the dwarf's nocturnal visit was no longer a mystery.

The mystic cipher—the golden key to wealth untold—had been stolen boldly from under his very nose, and King Kirby could only curse in impotent fury as he realized how cleverly he had been euchered by the enemy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DWARF'S RETURN.

MEANTIME, while the dare-devil dwarf was creating such a commotion in the camp of the enemy, his fugitive friends remained quietly in their distant hiding-place, awaiting his return with no little anxiety.

While fully appreciating the fact that they were no longer in immediate danger from King Kirby's minions, yet the Railroad Pards found their present surroundings quite uncongenial in several respects. It was in no wise pleasant to sit in a damp, solitary cavern, with not a ray of light to relieve the intensity of the darkness; besides, the pangs

ger were now unmistakably felt, serving as a disagreeable reminder that neither had tasted food for many long, weary hours.

Reclining upon the rocky floor of the chamber, where they could command a view of the tunnel entrance, the three fugitives eagerly watched and waited for the Spider to reappear.

"Confound the feller! Seems to me it's high time he showed up his ugly mug," growled Rufe Ruffle, discontentedly. "A poor devil stands a good chance o' starvin' to death afore relief arrives. Great snarlin' wildcats! I'm that hungry I could eat a hoss; an' the yawnin' vacancy in my breadbasket is growin' bigger ev'ry minnit."

"Let us hope the poor chap hasn't fallen into the toils o' the enemy," exclaimed Headlight Harry, solicitously. "He has incurred a great risk in entering the settlement, when discovery means probable capture and death. Even at this moment he may be a helpless prisoner in the hands of King Kirby's dastardly minions."

"The Lord forbid! We'd all be dead men by mornin', sure!" gasped the fireman, whose anxiety, it must be confessed, was less for the safety of the absent dwarf than for comfort of his own "inner man." "Hop-pin' horn-toads! This sort o' bizness may be fun for sich blokes as Signor Succo or Doctor Tanner; but skin me for a muskrat if it don't come kinder hard on a poor chap who has always b'en used to his reg'lar three meals a day, with a lunch at bedtime to boot."

Handsome Charlie, who had taken little part in the conversation, laughed good-naturedly at this.

"Well, I'm a trifle more fortunate myself, in that respect," he remarked. "It was only this very morning that I feasted sumptuously upon a fine, plump partridge, which I was lucky enough to bring down with my trusty revolver. Yet, my appetite at the present moment is such that I wouldn't refuse a good square feed of it were placed before me."

"Well, pards, I reckon it depends altogether upon the Spider whether we feast or fast to-night; so it behooves us to go down on our Ebenezers, like true Christian believers, and pray for his safe and speedy return. Meantime, Rufe, old man, it might be well to imitate the ideas of the noble red-men, who are said to alleviate the pangs of hunger by simply tightening their belts."

But his forlorn associate only heaved a lugubrious sigh as he replied, with a sorrowful shake of the head:

"I've tried the scheme a'ready, pard, an' it don't work worth a cent. I've drawn my belt up to the last notch, an' I'm durned nigh cut in halves; but the cravin's of the inner man are jest as obstreperous as ever. I reckon I ha'n't constructed on the same principles as a red-skin, nohow!"

The conversation flagged as the moments went slowly by; but still the weary watchers continued their irksome vigil. It was not until long after midnight, however, that their patience was finally rewarded.

Then, suddenly, the lugubrious hoot of the night owl, thrice repeated in quick succession, awoke the stillness of the forest, penetrating to the inner recesses of the cavern, and falling low but distinct upon the ears of its vigilant inmates. It was the pre-arranged signal by which the Spider was expected to announce his approach; and the three fugitives, springing to their feet, now waited in a state of eager expectancy.

Presently the call was repeated close at hand, and a moment later the screen of vines and bushes was pulled aside, and the mellow moonlight, streaming in, revealed the grotesque figure of the dwarf, standing in shadowy silhouette at the mouth of the passage.

"Hyar I am, at last, pards, safe an'

sound," he called, cheerfully. "An' I ha'n't come back empty-handed, neither, betcher sweet life. Come hyar an' gimme a lift with the plunder."

"You've b'en gone a mighty long time, Spider—fully five hours," declared Headlight Harry, as all hands advanced to greet the welcome visitor. "We were afraid you had fallen into the clutches o' King Kirby's gang."

A hideous chuckle escaped the lips of the hunchback.

"Ketch a weasel asleep—then talk o' ketchin' the Spider," he squeaked. "I reckon I knows the ins an' outs o' this hyer kentry too well to be tuk in by sich ornery galoots. Ho, ho! I've had some gorgeous fun ter-night. I've b'en all over Satan's Camp, an—"

"Hole on, thar, Spider!" interrupted Rufe Ruffle, pressing eagerly forward. "For Heaven's sake, partner, bottle up your chin-music, an' tell us, in the name of the great Christopher Columbus, have ye brought us anything to eat? That's the all absorbin' question w'ot's agitat' our mighty minds, jest at present, ye kin bet."

"Oh, yes; plenty to eat, pard—enuff to last a week," the grinning hunchback assured him. "Plenty to drink, too! Ha, ha! Come, ye shall see how successful the Spider kin be foragin' for grub in the enemy's camp."

He at once proceeded to reveal the nature of his heavy burden, which had by this time been dragged into the inner chamber, while the others gathered expectantly around, vaguely wondering what gastronomic treat the dwarf had in store for them.

"I hope you've brought along some kind of a light, Spider," said Headlight Harry anxiously. "Hungry as we are there isn't much satisfaction in eating in total darkness."

Even as he spoke, the hunchback deftly struck a match and applied it to the dingy, smoky lantern which he now suddenly brought to view. Its feeble, flickering rays but partially illuminated the gloomy recesses of the chamber, but to the three fugitives who had remained so long in utter darkness the change was a most welcome one.

"There's yer light, pards!" was the triumphant exclamation. "Not a first-class glim, I'll admit, but a durn sight better'n none. An' then there's plenty o' candle to fall back on after the ile burns out."

"Spider, you're a diamond of the first water! I only hope your efforts in the provision line have proved equally successful. Ah! What have we here? A big basket, as I'm a sinner, fairly loaded down with eatables. Holy Moses! What a sight for a hungry man!"

It was indeed, a huge market basket which the dwarf had deposited upon the cavern floor, and its contents he now deliberately removed, one by one, while the others looked on in blank astonishment. A whole ham, half a cheese, crackers, canned meats and fruit in choice variety, together with numerous other articles of diet, went to make up the Spider's "plunder," and testified to his ability as a forager.

"Where in the world did you get all these things?" gasped Headlight Harry, as the dwarf completed his display by going down into his capacious pockets and producing enough cigars, tobacco and bottled goods to stock a small-sized saloon.

"Oh, these hyar things are a part o' Jim Jumper's stock in trade," answered the hunchback, with a chuckle. "Jim's shebang was shut up for the night, but that didn't prevent me from borrowin' a few articles on account. 'Tain't more'n a week back that the p'izen galoot skinned me at poker, so I reckon him an' me are about even now."

"Well, I've heard it said that stolen

fruits are the sweetest, so here goes to prove the truth o' that adage," exclaimed the engineer, while as for Rufe Ruffle, he was already busily engaged upon the tempting viands, with his mouth too full for utterance.

For the next half-hour there was little attempt at conversation, as the hungry fugitives fell to discussing the fruits of the hunchback's forage with appetites sharpened by continued fasting. Their attack had no apparent effect, however, upon the generous supply which, as the Spider assured them, was calculated to last fully a week—an assurance that at least served to put at rest all fears of immediate starvation.

"Well, Spider," said the young engineer, at length, when the cravings of the inner man had been partially appeased, "you haven't yet given us the details of your wanderings in the camp of the enemy. Did you happen to run across that arch fiend, King Kirby, in your travels?"

A demoniac chuckle escaped the lips of the dwarf, at the bare recollection of his recent stirring experience with the boss of Satan's Camp.

"I sorter reckon I met the gentleman," he laughed in glee. "In fact, I've not only b'en inter the Gambler's Glory, ter-night, but I've penetrated to the king-pin's private chamber an' met him face to face."

"The deuce you have! Tell us all about it, Spider!"

The hunchback lost no time in recounting his thrilling adventures, while the others listened with marked attention, becoming especially interested when the speaker told how he had witnessed King Kirby's mental struggle with the elusive cryptogram.

"From the way the boss gambler cussed an' raved over that piece o' paper, I opined it must be somethin' extraordinary important, so when he threw it on the floor, almost within reach, I made up my mind I'd have the document or bu'st. I'll allow, however, my curiosity cum near provin' fatal, for it was only by the narrowest squeak that I managed to give 'em the slip."

"But did you secure the paper?" eagerly demanded Headlight Harry, fairly trembling with suppressed excitement.

For answer the Spider drew from his pocket an article which he held triumphantly up to view. One eager, devouring glance, and the engineer, leaping forward, snatched the paper from the hunchback's hand, a cry of triumph welling from his lips.

It was, indeed, that much prized document, the mystic cryptogram!

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET SOLVED.

FRANTICALLY waving the precious manuscript above his head, Headlight Harry danced about the cavern like one suddenly bereft of his senses.

"Hurrah! Victory at last!" he exclaimed, in glee. "Rufe, old man, we're in the race at last. Here is our long-lost legacy, the secret cipher, thus providentially returned to us, and we can now snap our fingers at King Kirby and his gang, so far as their hunt for the golden treasure is concerned. Shades of Christopher Columbus! Who ever dreamed of such good luck? Why, it fairly turns my brain!"

For some moments he continued to cavort over the rocky floor, much to the surprise and amusement of his companions; then, having in a measure given vent to his pent-up enthusiasm, he settled himself to examine the mysterious cipher so luckily restored to him, while the others gathered around forming an interested group.

It will be remembered that Headlight Harry had received his curious legacy from the dying miner, only to have it snatched from his grasp by King Kirby ere it had remained five minutes in his possession; and therefore he had given the cipher but a cursory examination. Now, however, he was

permitted to scrutinize the manuscript at leisure; and, as he continued to scan the rows of apparently meaningless letters, it was noticeable that the eager, confident look gradually faded from his countenance, and in its place appeared one of unmistakable doubt and perplexity.

"Confound the thing! It's scarcely to be wondered at that King Kirby gave up the job in disgust," he exclaimed, ruefully. "Why, it's a regular Chinese puzzle. However, tough though it is, the nut can be cracked; and the sooner we get to work, why the sooner shall we arrive at a solution of the mystery."

He produced a note-book and pencil, and went to work with an air of grim determination. His first act was to make a careful copy of the original manuscript, the faded characters of which were almost illegible in that dim, uncertain light; then, with a plain copy to work on, he devoted himself assiduously to the task of unraveling the puzzle which had so completely baffled King Kirby's recent efforts.

The others, meantime, having watched and waited for some minutes in silence, without any signs of progress on their comrade's part, now began to show symptoms of uneasiness at this irksome occupation. The Spider, finding little to interest him in the proceedings, shrunk away to a convenient corner and was soon fast asleep, his sonorous snores resounding throughout the gloomy cavern. A few moments later Handsome Charlie followed his example, and Rufe Ruffle was left alone to watch his partner's progress.

"Pard, I reckon you've bit off more than you kin ehaw," was his rather discouraging remark, as he glanced in disgust at the meaningless jumble of characters. "There's no sort o' sense in that there thing as it stands, an' how you propose to make meaning out of it is more'n I kin see."

"Why, Rufe, it's nothing but a simple cryptogram, and its solution calls for only a little time, patience and ingenuity," was Headlight Harry's confident reply. "Time I have in plenty, and it remains to be seen whether or not I possess the necessary qualifications for success."

"But how the deuce do you propose to go at it, at the start? And what in the name of Old Nick is a cryptogram, anyway?"

"Simply a cipher in which each different letter represents some other in the answer. For instance, the letter A, which occurs several times in the cipher, stands in each case for a certain other letter."

"But what letter?"

"Ah! that remains to be found out. It may be H or P, or it may be something else. That can only be ascertained by trying one letter after another until a clew is struck. Then the rest will be easy. Of course the preliminary work must be done haphazard; but there is a limit to the number of combinations, so one is bound to strike a clew sooner or later, if he only has the pluck to stick to it."

"It may be a year, and it may be never," quoted the incredulous fireman, with a grin. "Pard, I admire yer sand, but I'm inclined to b'lieve you're on a wild goose chase, nevertheless. Wal, I reckon I can't help ye any on the cryptogram bizness, so I'm off to the land o' Nod. How long are ye goin' to peg away at the pesky thing, anyway?"

"Until I have fathomed the mystery. No sleep for me while this puzzle remains unsolved," was the resolute response.

"Wal, hyar's luck! Jest call me, pard, if ye strike that tangible clew ye spoke of. Ta, ta! I'm off to the arms of Morpheus," and with a yawn Rufe went in search of a suitable spot in which to lay his weary frame, and soon was joining in the chorus of lusty snores that woke the echoes of the rock-walled chamber.

But Headlight Harry still bent to his task,

determination written upon his brow as, by the lantern's murky gleam, he eagerly scanned the mystic cipher seeking to fathom the secret of its hidden meaning. Minutes lengthened into hours, and still the engineer worked on with indefatigable zeal—worked on in silence broken only by the deep breathing of his sleeping comrades, until at last success crowned his persevering efforts.

Was it possible that he had struck a clew? A joyful gleam lighted upon his wan, anxious countenance at the thought. Yes, it was true—the combination was found at last! For a few moments his pencil fairly flew, then—

With a cry of triumph he bounded to his feet, nearly upsetting the lantern in his impetuous haste.

"Eureka! I have found it! The secret is mine at last!"

Aroused from slumber by the sudden commotion, his three companions were instantly on their feet.

"Hello! What's all this rumpus about? Are the enemy upon us?" demanded Rufe Ruffle, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

"Hurrah! Congratulate me, Rufe, old man! The puzzle is solved at last," cried Headlight Harry, fairly dancing with delight.

"The deuce, ye say!" was the incredulous exclamation, while the entire party gathered around the engineer, eager to inspect the inscription which he now triumphantly displayed as the result of his labors.

And this is what they read in place of the original cipher:

3	A	D	H	E	E	N	R	I
M	M	C	S	N	L	P	E	G
I	O	R	K	C	L	I	H	H
L	T	E	R	E	A	N	T	T
E	E	E	O	E	F	E	O	9
S	N	K	F	T	O	X	T	6

"There, what do you think of that for a complete exposition of the mystery?" cried Headlight Harry, evincing a pardonable pride in his achievement. "Just begin at the upper left-hand corner and read each line alternately down and up, thus: '3 miles N. E. to Mad Creek Forks, hence E. to fallen pine X to the right 96.' There you have the whole thing in a nutshell."

"By jingo, pard, I b'lieve you've struck it sure," gasped Rufe Ruffle, contemplating the result of his companion's skill in open-eyed astonishment. "But, I say, what does the letter X stand for after 'fallen pine?'"

"That is not meant for the letter X in this case, but is simply a cross, and is used here merely as a symbol of the word it is intended to represent. Thus if we read: 'east to fallen pine—cross—to the right 96,' why we have the meaning perfectly clear."

"Pard, you're a jim dandy, and no mistake," cried the delighted fireman, cutting a grotesque caper on the cavern floor. "Why, since you've b'en smart enuff to resolve that 'tarnal cryptogram inter plain United States lingo, it only remains for us to locate the spot mentioned in the document, an' then the yellow stuff is ours, sure enuff."

"The Spider, here, ought to be able to give us some valuable information, since he is thoroughly familiar with the region. How about that, Spider? Can you give us the location of Mad Creek?"

"Nothin' easier," chuckled the dwarf, "since it runs right by the mouth o' this hyar cave."

"The dickens you say!"

"It's a fact, pard. We're located on the banks o' the main stream, about half a mile below the forks."

"And the fallen pine mentioned here is the same identical ole tree by which we crossed

the crick a few rods up-stream, Rufe Ruffle, excitedly.

"Quite possible, Ruffle, yet by no means certain, since there are thousands of pines along the banks, and more than one may have—"

"No, pard," interrupted the hunchback, positively. "I've follered the stream for miles, an' I kin swear there's no other place in the vicinity that kin be confounded with this. Yonder pine is the only tree that bridges the stream."

"Then that settles it," laughed Harry. "I yield to your superior knowledge, Spider. But, by Jove! this is getting decidedly interesting. According to present indications, the cache must be in our immediate neighborhood."

"An' I vote that, since the scent is so warm, an' its already broad daylight outside, we had better keep the ball a-rollin' and test the accuracy o' your solution without delay. Shoot me for a catamount if I ha'n't gettin' mighty impatient, when I think that the cache of gold is close at hand, an' yet we are unable to lay our fingers on the precious yellow-boys."

Rufe Ruffle was no more eager than his companions to follow out the directions given by the old miner in his curious cryptogram; so, having satisfied themselves that the coast was clear of enemies, the four men left the cave and hastened along the bank to the fallen pine.

"Now, let us pause for a moment to get our bearings," the engineer exclaimed. "The directions say 'three miles northeast to the forks, hence east to the fallen pine.' Now, as the creek flows in an easterly direction, it follows that the old miner shaped his course down-stream, and upon the opposite or southerly side. Consequently, when he crossed at this point, it brought him to the very spot where we now stand."

"That's straight enuff, pard, I reckon."

"Good! Then it remains for us simply to carry out the final part of his directions, viz: 'to the right ninety-six.'"

"Ninety-six what?"

"Ah! that's the question. He may have meant inches, feet or yards; however, it is improbable that a man in his position would have the means of taking accurate measurements, so I think it's safe to assume that he adopted the simple method of computing the distance by paces."

"If that's the case, I'll mighty soon turn up the cache," declared Rufe Ruffle, excitedly. "Come on, boys, foller me! 'To the right, ninety-six! Whoop!'"

He strode along the bank at a rapid pace, carefully counting his steps, while the others followed at his heels. At the ninety-sixth stride he paused, and, as he eagerly scrutinized the vine-clad face of the cliff, an expression of unutterable surprise overspread his countenance, while a startled exclamation escaped his lips.

"Great hoppin' horn-toads! Here's a pretty go, skin me for an alligator if it ha'n't."

There was no need to inquire into the cause of his sudden agitation, for the others were equally quick to divine the singular truth—to see that, by following out the miner's directions, they had come straight back to the entrance to the cavern in the cliff! For some moments they stood staring at one another, quite nonplused at this singular discovery.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" gasped Headlight Harry, at length regaining the use of his tongue. "This is the queerest thing I ever dreamed of. Why, according to these calculations, Gideon Goff has cached his nuggets in the very cave where we have sojournd for the past day and night. If this isn't rare good luck, then I don't know what is."

In breathless haste the treasure-seekers retraced their steps to the underground cham-

ber, there to prosecute a vigorous search for the wealth which they now firmly believed to be concealed within. The cavern was of considerable extent, and it was quite probable that under ordinary circumstances they might have remained there a month without suspecting the truth; but now, guided to the mystic spot by the miner's cipher, they lost no time in penetrating the numerous nooks and crannies with which the walls abounded, each with a flickering candle to light his way.

It was the Spider who suddenly gave a triumphant shout which quickly brought the others to his side; and he pointed gleefully to a heap of something lying in a distant corner at his feet, something which glowed with a dull, metallic luster in the ghostly candle-light.

"It's gold—gold—beautiful nuggets of gold!" shrieked the dwarf, in elfin glee; and it needed but a glance at the newly-discovered mass to convince his companions of the truth.

There, indeed, lay the coveted treasure, just as the careful hand of Gideon Goff had placed it—a gleaming heap of precious yellow lumps, of various shapes and sizes, and all in a high degree of purity.

What a sight for the astonished gaze of the Railroad Pard! In blank amazement they stared first at one another, then at the glittering pile of nuggets, scarcely crediting the evidence of their senses. The cache of gold was no myth, after all, but a very pleasing reality; and the bold young treasure-hunters experienced a thrill of sudden exultation as they gazed upon this wondrous wealth, and realized that the precious prize for which they had so long been striving was won at last.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPIDER'S MISSION.

At last, after many vicissitudes, the Railroad Pard had reached the goal of their ambition, and the miner's treasure was in the hands of its rightful owner. Yet, as they continued to feast their gaze upon the glittering heap of nuggets, it was to experience something of the feelings of the individual who suddenly found a white elephant on his hands.

There was the marvelous treasure lying at their very feet, yet in its present state it was of no more value than so much common sand; and how to carry away the wealth so happily discovered was a question that now assailed the young gold-hunters with sudden force.

There they were in the heart of the enemy's country, cooped up in a dismal cave, to venture forth from which meant probable discovery by the horde of merciless foes who were at that very moment scouring the vicinity, bent on their destruction. If to escape with their own lives seemed almost an impossibility, what could be said of the prospect of successfully bearing away a ton or more of cumbersome nuggets?

The situation was certainly appalling, and a realization of this fact served to put a sudden damper upon their exuberant spirits, which had been aroused to an enthusiastic pitch by the recent wonderful discovery. Turning away from the fascinating pile of gold, the treasure-hunters now sought to devise some way out of this stupendous difficulty, entering into consultation with an earnestness quite in keeping with the gravity of the situation.

Various ideas were suggested only to be rejected as impracticable, and it remained for Rufe Ruffle to finally propose a plan which was adopted as the one most likely to produce satisfactory results.

In this hour of emergency the fireman's fertile mind had reverted to their late acquaintance, Big Hank Hawkins, the giant leader of the Fortune City Law and Order League, whose friendship had been thor-

oughly tested during their brief sojourn in that lively community. The Vigilante chief was in a position to command a force strong enough to sweep King Kirby's gang from the face of the earth; and, could he once be communicated with, there was little doubt that he would hasten immediately to the rescue. But Fortune City lay beyond the mountains, full forty miles away, and the chances of communication with Big Hawk seemed very slight, indeed, under such adverse circumstances.

It was Rufe's proposition, however, to dispatch the Spider on this delicate mission, feeling confident that the latter's natural shrewdness, together with his thorough knowledge of the country, would enable him to pass through the enemy's lines in safety. His plan was to make the attempt that very night, when under cover of darkness the cunning dwarf could make his way to some point in the mountain pass beyond King Kirby's sentries, and there await the coming of the stage-coach which would leave next morning for Fortune City, and which would land him in that place in the early evening. Then, provided these movements were successfully carried out, the beleaguered fugitives could expect to hear from Big Hank before the closing of another day.

Such was Rufe Ruffle's plan, to which his comrades gave immediate approval; for, while the chances of sending a man through the enemy's line without discovery were extremely slender, it was the very best scheme that could be devised under the trying circumstances. As for the hunchback, fresh from one victory over his foes, he hailed with delight another opportunity to distinguish himself, and declared his ability to make the trip successfully, in spite of King Kirby's minions.

Having definitely decided upon a plan of action, the little party impatiently awaited the passing of the day. Night fell at last, covering the earth with its somber mantle. Not a star appeared to relieve the Stygian blackness. A more perfect time for the Spider's venture could scarcely be imagined, and these favorable conditions were joyfully hailed as an omen of success.

The hunchback's preparations for the enterprise consisted merely in seeing that his shooting-irons were in proper condition, and in appropriating a flask of whisky to cheer him on his perilous way; this done, he declared his readiness to depart.

"Keep up yer courage, pards, while I'm gone. I'll take yer message to Big Hawk in quick time, an' you kin count on seein' me back with a powerful gang jest as soon as the ground kin be covered. Meantime, there's plenty to eat an' drink, an' I reckon ye needn't fear diskivery s' long as ye don't poke yer heads outside the cave in broad daylight."

With this parting admonition the hunchback started resolutely upon his hazardous mission. With noiseless, catlike tread he moved along the shore, crossed upon the fallen pine and plunged boldly into the gloomy forest; while the three fugitives settled themselves to endure the days and nights that would probably elapse ere the messenger's return.

This would of itself have been a fairly congenial task, now that the food and light were plenty, could they have but had the welcome assurance that the dwarf would succeed in running the gantlet in safety. Instead of this, however, there was great danger of his falling into the hands of the merciless foes who infested the region, and the fear of this calamity served to keep the waiting ones in a state of constant suspense and anxiety.

As the Spider had assured them, there was little danger of discovery so long as they remained secure in their hidden retreat; and especially was it unlikely that the enemy would prosecute their search in the darkness

of night. Nevertheless, the fugitives were resolved that no lack of caution on their part should lead to possible recapture; consequently the night was divided into watches of equal length, and each took his turn on guard at the tunnel entrance, where the approach of an intruder might be instantly detected.

The dawn of day found Headlight Harry at his post, while the others were sleeping soundly within the inner chamber. The young engineer was wrapt in contemplation, indulging in roseate dreams of the future when he would be permitted to enter upon a new and prosperous existence, thanks to the wondrous wealth with which the generosity of the old miner had endowed him.

Thus pleasantly employed he failed to overhear the sound of approaching footsteps, and started violently when a hand was suddenly laid lightly upon his shoulder. Quickly turning, it was to behold Rufe Ruffle standing there with a broad grin upon his face.

"Ha, ha! Caught ye asleep at yer post, eh? You're a purty kind of a watch-dog, I don't think," he chuckled, grimly.

"No, Rufe, you're greatly mistaken—not asleep by any means, but merely lost in thought. But what are you doing here, frightening a chap out of a year's growth? I thought you was sound asleep."

"Hist! Don't speak so loud," cautioned the firearm. "He's sound asleep—don't wake him up!"

"He? Who do you mean?"

"Why, the chap who calls hisself Handsome Charlie, to be sure."

"Well, what of that? What the dickens are you driving at, anyway?"

"Pard," exclaimed Rufe Ruffle, sinking his voice to a cautious whisper, "I've come to have a leetle private confab with ye about that same young chap. I've b'en a wantin' to unburden my mind for some time, but this is the first chance I've had to say a word on the quiet."

"Well?"

"Now, pard, it strikes me there's something mighty mysterious about this Handsome Charlie—"

"Humph! Seems to me you've been a long time finding that out," interrupted the engineer with a quizzical smile. "Why, I reached that conclusion long ago."

"In the first place," went on his companion, regardless of the interruption, "there was the curious way in which he skeddaddled on the night of our arrival; an' since we met the second time he has not volunteered a single word in explanation of his strange conduct on that occasion."

"Doubtless because no one has been inquisitive enough to ask him."

"Then, too, his present conduct is somewhat suspicious, according to my way o' thinkin'. He seldom speaks unless he's spoken to, an' if ye happen to look at him uncommon hard, he gets red in the face an' fidgets about uneasily, like as if he'd b'en a stealin' chickens, er somethin', an' was powerful afraid o' bein' found out."

A strange smile hovered upon the face of the young engineer, as he listened to Rufe's quaint utterance.

"Since you are inquisitive about our gallant young partner in misery, I think I can give you a little enlightenment," he said, with an air of confidence. "I, too, have been a close observer of the various things you mention, and I have reached a conclusion which in my mind is pretty near correct. I had intended to keep my suspicions to myself; but, since you have opened the subject, I have no objection to telling you just what I think of Handsome Charlie."

"Fire away, pard! I'm all ears, as the donkey said."

"Rufe, do you recollect the handsome girl we became acquainted with during our

stay in Fortune City?—the fearless, devoted young woman who helped to rescue us from the hands of the road-agents?"

"What, Wild Nell, the outlaw's daughter? Of course I remember her, bless her pretty picture!"

"And you also remember that, after the death of her misguided father and the annihilation of his band, the girl suddenly disappeared; and all efforts to discover her whereabouts had, up to the time of our departure, proved fruitless?"

"Yes, pard, I recollect it perfectly well, an' what's more, I'd give all I possess to know where Wild Nell is at this minnit. It's a fact, pard, that I took an uncommon fancy to that gal, for a more dashin' bit o' calker I never clapped eyes on in all my born days."

"Well, Rufe, it is quite possible that you may meet the girl again. In fact, I think she can be found not far from this very spot."

There was a significance in Headlight Harry's speech that was not without effect upon his companion, who stared at him in sudden amazement.

"Great jumpin' horn-toads! Kin it be possible that—"

"I'm not making a positive assertion, mind you—it is only mere conjecture. But it strikes me very forcibly that if you should remove that dainty waxed-mustache which Handsome Charlie sports, and supply a wealth of jetty curls in place of his present close-cut locks, you would have a very good imitation of Wild Nell."

"Not an imitation, pard, but the real genuine article," exclaimed Rufe Ruffle, in illy-suppressed excitement. "Skin me for a woodchuck if you haven't struck it jest right! Why, I knowed right along that I'd seen that face afore somewhere, but I was too big an idiot to penetrate the mystery."

"This explains, you see, why Handsome Charlie is so uneasy in our presence. He feels insecure in his disguise, and fears we may recognize him, though why he should fear recognition by his friends, is more than I can imagine."

"That's jest it, pard—that's a problem which even your shrewd brain has failed to solve. Why in the name o' Christopher Columbus should the gal rig herself up in boy's clothes, an' foller us inter this ungodly country? That's what I'd like to know!"

"Well, I dare say explanations will be forthcoming in due time. But for the present, Rufe, we must rest content with what we already know. It is best that our fellow-companion should remain ignorant of our suspicions until a more fitting time arrives; so for the present we will continue to refer to him (or her) as Handsome Charlie—"

"Hark! What in the name o' sin was that?"

It was a lusty shout, sounding near at hand, which suddenly reached the ears of the men at the tunnel entrance, eliciting the warning exclamation from Rufe Ruffle, and putting a sudden end to their discussion. Even as they paused to listen the cry was repeated, and an instant later an answering call came less distinctly to their ears.

In sudden surprise and trepidation the Railroad Pards carefully parted the vines and peered without, only to start violently at the unexpected sight that met their gaze.

Standing upon the opposite bank of the creek, directly in front of the cave entrance, was a stalwart, well armed ruffian whom they recognized as one of King Kirby's mercenaries. He was gazing intently across the stream, his keen gaze fixed apparently upon the very spot where crouched the dumfounded fugitives.

What did it mean? Was their hiding-place discovered?

CHAPTER XII. BELEAGUERED.

In an agony of suspense and fear the Railroad Pards watched the man upon the oppo-

site shore, and a moment later a second ruffian came hurrying to the scene.

"Hyar I am, pard!" was the new-comer's salutation. "Have you diskivered anything o' the cussed runaways?"

"I reckon I've diskivered somethin' that may have some bearin' on the subject," came the prompt reply. "Jest clap yer optics on the strip o' sand which runs along the opposite bank, atwixt the water an' the cliff, an' tell me if ye see anything there to interest ye."

"There's footprints there, I opine, though I wouldn't swear to it, since my eyesight is none o' the best," said the second ruffian, after a long, searching glance in the direction indicated.

"That's jist what my peepers say, too, pard. Now, what's footprints doin' over there, I wonder? Seems to me it'll pay us to examine them thar marks a leetle closer."

"That's my opinion, too, Billy. The boss hez offered a han'sum reward to the first man who sights the fugitives, so I opine it'll be a great feather in our caps if we kin git the bulge on the rest o' the boys. We mustn't throw away any chances."

"Come on, then! There's a place upstream where we kin cross without wettin' our precious toes," and the pair moved hurriedly away in the direction of the fallen pine.

Meantime the Railroad Pards, behind their screen of vines, had overheard every word of this conversation, and their feelings may be better imagined than described. It was easy to divine that the footprints upon the shore, which had thus unluckily attracted the notice of these argus-eyed man-hunters, were those made by the Spider, who, owing to the utter darkness at the time of his departure, had been unable to remove the tell-tale traces after his usual careful manner.

"Pard, we're in for it now, and no mistake," whispered Rufe Ruffle, as he witnessed the movements of the enemy. "Them galoots are comin' right over hyar, bent on further investigation, an' I reckon the fur will fly thick an' fast afore many minnits."

"We are capable of giving them a warm reception, I fancy," was the resolute response. "Woe be to the scoundrels if they venture too near. Rufe, if those men discover us they must not live to spread the intelligence to the rest of the gang. Our lives and liberties demand that they be squelched, and that too, without the use of firearms, if possible, since there's no telling how many more may be close at hand."

Together the intrepid railroaders watched and waited for their foes to reappear, and ere many moments had elapsed the voices of the latter were again heard, this time but a few feet distant.

"Sure enuff, pard, I wasn't mistook, 'for these hyer are human footprints, an' fresh at that. Only a few hours old, or I miss my guess," declared the first ruffian, triumphantly.

"Mebbe some of our own gang have made the tracks—"

"Mebbe so—meboe not! I'm a-goin' to nose inter the thing a leetle deeper, jest for luck. This is a darn queer lookin' place, anyway. Like as not thar's a cave or somethin' hid away behind these pesky vines."

There was a minute of awful silence as the two men behind the screen waited in breathless suspense for the denouement which they felt must quickly follow. Then the expected happened—the vines were rudely pushed aside, and two villainous faces looked into their own!

With every nerve and sinew strained to meet this trying emergency, the Railroad Pards acted with wondrous skill and quickness. Like lightning their brawny arms shot out, and sinewy fingers crossed about the necks of the astonished trailers, while simultaneously each man dealt a terrific blow full in the face of his victim, at the same time pushing him violently backward.

With a loud splash the two ruffians fell into the creek together, and were borne rapidly away by the swift-running current. One of them, however, being but partially stunned by the blow, quickly recovered his senses and struck out desperately for the opposite shore.

In a moment Rufe Ruffle had covered the swimmer with his revolver. Hazardous though it was to use the weapon, it was certainly better to run the risk of the shot being heard than to court certain disaster by permitting the escape of the runaway; and, reasoning thus, Rufe pulled trigger just as his man leaped upon the bank.

Down went the ruffian as the sharp crack of the weapon rung upon the air, but in an instant he was upon his feet again and dashing madly away, one arm hanging limp and bleeding by his side.

"Confound the luck! I only winged the varmint," cried the fireman, in deep disgust. "The mischief is done now, I reckon. 'Twixt that chap an' the pistol-shot we'll have a hull hornets' nest around our ears."

Nor was he one whit mistaken, for within five minutes a number of the gang had gathered upon the river-bank, among them the wounded outlaw, who was seen to gesticulate wildly in the direction of the cliff. From every direction they came rushing to the scene, until the dismayed railroaders could count fully a score of well-armed desperadoes assembled in full fighting array.

"Confound the rascals! They're thicker than flies in summer time," growled Headlight Harry, as he marked this steady increase in the enemy's forces. "Well, let 'em come on if they want a scrimmage. We have the advantage of position here, and can pick 'em off as fast as they show their ugly heads at the tunnel entrance."

The desperadoes, however, showed no desire for immediate hostilities, contenting themselves with a few angry shouts. Not a shot was fired, and the gang was evidently awaiting reinforcements ere beginning an assault.

The Railroad Pards had retired a few feet into the narrow passage, where they could command a view of the opposite shore without being seen themselves, for the vines at the entrance had been torn away during the recent struggle, leaving the entire opening unobstructed. Handsome Charlie, meantime, being awakened by the commotion, appeared, pale-faced but resolute, eager to contribute his share to the defense of the stronghold; but Headlight Harry, now doubly solicitous for his safety, quickly ordered him back to the inner cavern.

"This passage is scarcely wide enough for two, and a third man would only be in the way," he explained. "You can take your ease in the cave, acting as a reserve force to be drawn upon in event of an emergency."

"An' why wouldn't it be a good scheme for us all to take a sneak in that direction?" queried Rufe Ruffle, with a growing solicitude for his own welfare. "We'd be a darn sight safer there, an' could defend ourselves just as well in case of attack. If them galoots should take a notion to send a volley inter this tunnel, we'd all be cold cadavers inside o' three seconds."

"There's no danger to be apprehended on that score; I am confident King Kirby is too anxious to capture us alive! Doubtless he has already given orders to that effect, for you observe that not a shot has been fired by the enemy, great though the provocation to do so. I, for one, shall remain here where I can watch their maneuvers to the best possible advantage."

"Then I'm with ye, pard. But I warn ye I shall make tracks for the cave the minnit the firin' begins from t'other side," declared Rufe Ruffle, grimly, while he proceeded to look to his numerous shooting-irons and see that they were all loaded and ready for instant use.

Several hours passed with no signs of activity on the part of the desperado gang, and to the beleaguered fugitives the situation was now becoming a trifle monotonous. At last, however, it was apparent that the reinforcements had arrived, for the opposite shore now fairly bristled with armed men. Among them could be seen the redoubtable King Kirby and his villainous right bower, Black Jerry. The two latter were observed in earnest consultation, taking care to maintain a position behind their men, where any chance bullet from the cave would be unlikely to harm them.

But whatever the result of this lengthy confab, the gambler's formidable forces still remained inactive. Evidently the proposed assault, if any, was to be made under cover of darkness, which was now fast approaching. There was no attempt at parley, for King Kirby knew too well the resolute character of the beleaguered men to for a moment imagine that they could be drawn by such means from their strong position.

Such was the situation when night fell again upon the scene. Unlike its predecessors it was clear and starry, and the rising moon shed its mellow beams upon the rushing waters of the creek, making the tunnel entrance as light as day. This circumstance was hailed with satisfaction by the watchful men within, for there was no danger of a cunning foe man stealing upon them unawares.

It was with feelings of confidence that the Railroad Pards awaited the expected attack, for they were quick to realize their advantageous position. The assaulting party would be forced to enter the tunnel one at a time, and as the defenders were plentifully supplied with arms and ammunition, it was probable that they would mow down their foes as fast as they appeared. So long as King Kirby persisted in his purpose to capture his adversaries alive, the position of the latter seemed absolutely impregnable.

Silence reigned upon the opposite shore, yet it was probable that the gambler's party still remained in full force; and, while the hours rolled away without the slightest demonstration, this circumstance did not induce the Railroad Pards to for an instant relax their vigilance. They were confident that King Kirby, anxious as he was for their recapture, would not allow the night to pass without a hostile movement, and so held themselves in readiness for instant action at the first sign of danger.

Nor were the young defenders mistaken in supposing that the gambler's men were already preparing for some strategic movement. Yet, when it finally came, it was so sudden and from such an unexpected quarter that they were taken completely by surprise.

As they continued to watch with ready weapons, it was to suddenly behold some huge black object drop abruptly down from the cliff above, to an exact level with the tunnel entrance, where it now swung slowly to and fro; only for an instant, however, for before the startled observer could move to prevent it, the mysterious object was swung steadily inward by some invisible power, until it lodged upon the rocky ledge in such a manner as to completely block the opening.

The object proved to be a smooth, rounded boulder which had been lowered by ropes from the top of the cliff, to be instantly pushed into the passage by men who had stolen unseen along the bank for this very purpose. But while the Railroad Pards could readily comprehend this fact, they were quite at a loss to divine the object of so singular a movement. Enlightenment soon came, however, for a few moments later the Pards made a startling discovery—the big boulder was moving slowly but steadily toward them, propelled by some invisible agency!

It was a clever and unusual device by

which the besiegers sought to reach their intended prey. Several of their number had already effected a lodgment within the mouth of the passage, with the big rock forming a novel but effectual shield from the fire of their enemies. The defenders stood nonplused at this unexpected turn of affairs; but only for a moment, for Headlight Harry was prompt to devise a plan for checking the advancing ruffians.

"If the rascals think to drive us like rats into a corner, I fancy they will soon find themselves mistaken, for I know a little trick that's worth two o' theirs. Quick, Rufe, come with me!" and the engineer hurriedly led the way to the inner cavern.

"By blocking up this end of the passage we can easily frustrate their little game," he continued, eagerly. "Here are plenty of loose fragments which may be utilized for the purpose; so pitch in, Rufe, and work like a beaver. There isn't a moment to lose."

So industriously did the young fellows bend to their task, that in an incredible short time the inner entrance was walled in so effectually as to defy any ordinary assault. Meantime the big boulder, propelled by vigorous hands, moved steadily along, inch by inch, until it encountered the obstruction. And there it stopped, despite the frantic efforts of the men behind it. There was a series of muttered oaths from the baffled desperadoes, followed a moment later by the sound of shuffling feet as they retreated down the passage.

"Ha, ha! They've gone to tell their boss that his scheme don't work worth a cent," laughed Headlight Harry, in elation. "Rufe, old man, we are still masters of the situation."

So, indeed, it seemed; and the brave defenders awaited further developments with renewed confidence in the strength of their position.

Another long period of inactivity now ensued. Minutes lengthened into hours, and yet no signs of further hostilities from the discomfited enemy.

"Wonder what new scheme that ornery galoot, King Kirby, is gittin' through his noddle, now?" chuckled Rufe Ruffle. "I 'spect his next move 'll be to bore a hole down through the roof o' this hyar cavern, an' punk his gang onto our very backs."

"Oh, hang King Kirby and his devilish plans. We can afford to laugh at him now, I fancy. Why, it must now be nearly noon, and I expect we shall hear from the Spider very soon. In fact, he ought to be here now."

"Don't pin your faith on the Spider, pard. It's dollars to doughnuts that the dwarf's food for buzzards long ago."

"I don't think so," declared Headlight Harry, confidently. "Something tells me that the hunchback has been successful in his mission, and—"

"Hark! There's them galoots in the tunnel, ag'in. What fresh deviltry are they hatchin' now, I wonder?"

Breathlessly listening, they soon heard the rush of swiftly flying feet, while at the same instant an ominous, sputtering sound came faintly to their ears.

"My God!" cried Headlight Harry, in sudden terror. "The villains have laid a gunpowder train, and we shall be blown into smithereens. Fly, comrades—fly for your lives!"

Even as they turned to seek a safer position, there came a thunderous explosion which shook the very earth. The occupants of the chamber were all thrown violently to the floor by the terrific concussion; but this very occurrence saved them from harm from the cloud of rocky fragments that flew in every direction. Dazed and bewildered they struggled to their feet, only to be confronted by still another peril.

The obstructions at the tunnel entrance had been completely demolished by the ex-

plosion, and now, through the opening thus made, King Kirby's ruffians dashed triumphantly into the chamber. At sight of the intruders, however, the gallant defenders were instantly on the alert, nothing daunted by the terrible odds against them.

"Up an' at 'em, pards!" yelled Rufe Ruffle, wildly. "Sail in an' give 'em Hail Columby!"

The next moment the gloomy cavern was transformed into a very pandemonium, as the sharp crack of revolvers and the vicious whizz of flying bullets mingled with the cries of the excited combatants.

CHAPTER XIII.

RESCUE.

MEANTIME, while the beleaguered treasure seekers battled desperately for life and liberty, powerful friends were hastening to the rescue, drawing nearer—nearer—with every passing moment. For the Spider had succeeded nobly in his perilous undertaking, bearing his message straight to Big Hank Hawkins; and with such vigor did the giant Vigilante act in behalf of his imperiled friends, that in one short hour he had mustered a strong mounted force, and was thundering on his way to Satan's Camp.

On through the gloomy night rode this mighty cavalcade, pushing in headlong haste over the rugged mountain trail, until the morning sun, looking down into the narrow, cliff-bound pass, saw them rapidly drawing near their destination—their jaded steeds flecked with foam, themselves covered with dust from head to foot, sore and weary from their hard night's ride, yet none the less eager for the coming fray.

Drawing closer to the haunts of the enemy, the party carefully concealed their horses, and, under the guidance of the demon dwarf, plunged into the forest in the direction of the hidden retreat. Contrary to expectations none of King Kirby's minions were encountered on the way, for the sentries had long since abandoned their posts, flocking to the scene of action like vultures to a feast.

As they drew near Mad Creek, however, wild shouts suddenly smote their ears, commingled with the sound of rapidly exploding firearms, warning the would-be rescuers that their arrival was not a moment too soon; and, stealing noiselessly through the undergrowth, they soon reached a position where they could overlook the thrilling scene.

For a few brief moments the trailers crouched in ambush, hastily examining their weapons and nerving themselves for the coming contest. Then, at Big Hank's command, a deadly volley was poured suddenly into the midst of the desperadoes who lined the river-bank. Men went down like ninepins before the storm of lead, while, simultaneously with the first sweeping volley, Big Hank's avengers burst from concealment and rushed fiercely upon the bewildered enemy, firing incessantly as they came. The contest was over almost as quickly as it began, for King Kirby's gang made no attempt at resistance, but fled in wild disorder. Those who had already penetrated the cavern now found themselves in a trap, and were mercilessly shot down as they sought to escape from the tunnel.

In five minutes from the firing of the first shot not an enemy was in sight, and the Railroad Pards were soon busily engaged in shaking hands with their gallant deliverers, rejoiced beyond measure at the lucky turn of affairs.

Big Hank was now clearly master of the situation; but the giant's blood was up, and he did not propose to rest content with this signal victory. After a brief rest, therefore, he ordered an advance upon Satan's Camp, determined to wipe that den of iniquity from existence. The onward march was made without opposition, for the surviving denizens had all fled in terror to the mountains, and an hour later the victorious invaders

were snugly encamped in King Kirby's stronghold.

Confident of Big Hank's sterling integrity, Headlight Harry did not hesitate to reveal to that astonished individual the secret of the hidden treasure. The giant leader, in turn, promptly vouched for the reliability of his followers, and declared that under their escort, the gold should be transported safely to Fortune City. The cave was revisited, therefore, and the precious nuggets brought to Satan's Camp in a quantity of bags which had been taken along for that purpose. The stage-coach from Fortune City was pressed into service immediately upon its arrival, and into it the bags of gold were carefully piled.

The Vigilante chief did not propose to tarry longer than necessary in that dangerous vicinity, for both King Kirby and Black Jerry had succeeded in escaping, and it was probable that they would make a desperate effort to collect their scattered men, in which event they would still be strong enough to make things decidedly unpleasant. That very night, pausing only for a brief rest, the return journey was begun.

And as the rickety old stage-coach moved slowly along the rugged trail, groaning and creaking beneath its precious load, active men with torches flitted through the camp, bent on their work of destruction, applying the firebrand industriously here and there until the entire settlement was ablaze. The frail wooden buildings burned like tinder, and in an hour's time nothing remained of Satan's Camp but a smoldering heap of ashes.

The journey to Fortune City was performed without mishap, and on the way Big Hank Hawkins waxed enthusiastic over the new-found treasure, which he pronounced to be of marvelous purity and value.

"Why, pard, it'll assay 95 per cent. pure gold, or I'm a Dutchman," he declared. "Now, of course, your nuggets have got to be converted into bullion before bein' ready for the market, an' I reckon there isn't a better place than Fortune City in which to have the job done up in proper fashion. Since you are ignorant o' sich matters, I guess you won't object to have me steer you through an' see that ye don't get cheated; an' in the mean time I shall be too proud to live if you'll consent to become the honored guests o' Big Hank Hawkins."

It goes without saying that this generous offer was thankfully accepted, and the Railroad Pard entered upon their second sojourn in Fortune City with many bright anticipations for the future.

Of course Handsome Charlie had accompanied the party back to Fortune City, and soon after their arrival there Headlight Harry summoned the mysterious youth to a private conference. The engineer had, meantime, discarded the disguise which he had worn throughout his recent experience, and now appeared in his own proper character. Therefore, when his visitor entered, it was to pause in sudden surprise and doubt.

"Come in! It's really me," was the pleasant salutation. "Ha, ha! I've changed considerably since you last saw me, have I not?"

"Indeed, you have. Of course I knew that you were disguised, but I had scarcely expected so startling a change. It is a change for the better, too, I can assure you."

"Ah! Thanks for the compliment. I am sorry I cannot return the same; but it is true that, while you look very handsome in that jaunty attire, I should admire you much more in habiliments better suited to your sex."

Swift and sure the shot went to its mark, and Headlight Harry, watching keenly, saw the face of his visitor suddenly suffused with crimson.

"Wh—what do you mean?" was the stammering ejaculation.

"Simply that I have guessed your secret—you are Wild Nell! Come, now, do not deny it! I knew the truth long ago."

And then Headlight Harry was sorry he had spoken so bluntly, for to his great dismay the girl, finding her secret discovered, burst into a flood of tears. Instantly the engineer was at her side.

"There, there—forgive me if I have acted too harshly. I did not intend to hurt your feelings. Come, there's nothing to cry about. Just sit down here, dry your tears, and tell me how you happened to adopt so unusual a disguise. I am anxious to learn what induced you to take such a perilous step."

Shamefaced and trembling, Wild Nell suffered him to lead her to a chair. All her usual bravery and coolness had vanished now, and she was but the poor, frail woman, helpless in her weakness.

"Since you have found me out, I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of it," she sobbed, at last. "You see, when my poor, misguided father met his doom, I feared that I, too, would meet with violence at the hands of the mob; so I donned this disguise and fled. I dared not remain in Fortune City, where I was so well known, for fear of recognition, and, knowing that you were bound for Satan's Camp, I determined to go there also. I felt that you were the only friends I had left, and yet I feared to reveal my identity even to you. As we neared the camp my courage suddenly failed me, and I fled to seek seclusion in the mountains, but only to meet with you again, quite accidentally, as you well know. I know I have acted very foolishly and unwomanly; but what was a poor girl to do? No home—no friends—no place to lay my head," and Wild Nell's sobs broke out afresh.

"Come, cheer up, my dear girl! You have been guilty of no misdemeanor—merely a trifle indiscreet to thus flee from imaginary enemies into the face of actual peril. But I am not going to criticise your conduct—my object in seeking this interview is a highly important one, and I will come to the point at once without further delay. Of course you are aware that I leave in a few days for my Eastern home, and before I depart I wish to talk seriously with you about the future. I have taken a strong interest in your welfare, Nell, and I feel that I cannot leave you behind in this wild, uncouth region, which, though it is your birthplace, is nevertheless ill-fitted for so pure and bright a being. You are beautiful and intelligent, and deserve to shine in a higher sphere of life."

"Now, Nell, I have a proposition to make, and I wish you to consider it in all seriousness. My desire is to have myself appointed your guardian, and in that capacity take you home with me. I have a widowed mother—dear, kind-hearted, old lady—who I am sure will rejoice in your companionship and cherish you as her own. Then, too, there is another whom I soon expect to wed—she will extend to you a sister's love and tenderness. You shall not want for friends and companions, and all that money can buy shall be yours, for I am rich, now, and can make a lady of you, Nell. Come, what do you think of my proposal? Is it not worth accepting?"

While Headlight Harry spoke thus earnestly and rapidly, Wild Nell sat with tear-filled eyes fixed eagerly, wonderingly upon his face, while in her own beautiful countenance surprise, joy, gratitude were evenly blended.

"Surely you are not in earnest," she stammered, at last. "You wouldn't be so kind, so generous, to a poor, wild, good-for-nothing girl like me?"

"I assure you I am thoroughly in earnest. Can you not trust me, Nell?"

Only for an instant did the glad girl hesitate.

"Yes," said she, softly, "I can trust you; and I will go with you if you desire it, and try to prove myself worthy of your generosity, though I fear you will never succeed in making a fine lady of Wild Nell."

"Hurrah! That settles the matter, then," cried the young engineer, in high elation. "You shall never regret your decision, Nell, for I shall use my best endeavors to make your future a bright and happy one. This very day, then, I will consult a lawyer, and have the necessary papers drawn up which shall constitute me your legally-appointed guardian. Henceforward, please remember that you are neither Handsome Charlie nor Wild Nell, but—Headlight Harry's Protegee!"

The speaker laughed in boyish enthusiasm, while Nell—happy, joyous Nell—placed her little hand confidently in his, smiling brightly through her tears.

THE END.

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